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(Re)Building Cultural, Community, and Academic Identity: Freshman Composition After Katrina

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(Re)Building Cultural, Community, and Academic Identity: Freshman Composition
After Katrina

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
Rhetoric and Composition

by

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A.B. Wheaton College, MA, 2002

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ABSTRACT

Composition studies has become increasingly focused on the connection between place, identity, and the act of writing, maintaining, as theorist Nedra Reynolds states, that “*where* writing instruction takes place has everything to do with *how*” (20). Considering the social, political, and cultural contexts of a post-Katrina Southeastern Louisiana, administrators and instructors at the University of New Orleans must begin to question how our freshmen writing program can best serve our students as they enter into the future of a “new” New Orleans. Implementing a “localized pedagogy” into the freshmen composition classroom—that is, a community-based pedagogy that draws from local resources, engages students in acts of public writing, and implements a service learning component—can help students answer to new roles of citizenship. This project exhibits instructor pedagogy and student writing generated during post-Katrina semesters to illustrate what a localized pedagogy might look like in composition classrooms at UNO.

INTRODUCTION

Place does matter; surroundings do have an effect on learning or attitudes towards learning, and material spaces have a political edge. In short, where writing instruction takes place has everything to do with how.

—Nedra Reynolds from “Composition’s Imagined Geographies” (20)

As the University of New Orleans rebuilds after Katrina, instructors are faced with a challenge: in an educational institution with a majority population of students from Louisiana and the Greater New Orleans area, how can we help our students (re)identify and (re)connect with the university and, further, with the New Orleans community from which they were displaced? At a time when there is a campus-wide, state-wide, and even nationwide focus on our region and Katrina-related issues, we as writing tutors and instructors have begun to witness our students’ struggles to locate themselves within these conversations. In freshmen composition, our students are writing essays arguing for or against the rebuilding of the Ninth Ward; contending who, if anyone, is at fault—local, state, or federal government—for the inefficient disaster response. Across disciplines, instructors are framing assignments which ask students to directly engage in the rebuilding of our campus and local community. For example, in an Urban Planning course, students are asked to present proposals for rebuilding the city; in Business Administration, students are positing strategies to aid small businesses in reopening their doors. 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. It seems that academic departments within UNO are instinctively integrating a more “community conscious” pedagogy into their students’ classroom experience. Nurturing our students’ leanings towards (what I will term) a more “localized pedagogy” in the Freshmen

Composition classrooms of UNO also makes sense; in post-Katrina New Orleans, the UNO freshmen composition sequence has the potential to become a venue for engaging students in the (re)negotiation of academic and community identities within the classroom and beyond—into the New Orleans community.

How can we help our students reconnect, and why do so through the freshmen composition program? To address this question, we might begin by examining how others have envisioned and defined the actual “space” of the composition classroom. As a discipline, composition studies is preoccupied with space (both real and imaginary spaces) that constitute our field, such as composition’s “place” in research, or its “placement” within English departments. As a result, those within composition studies have no lack of spatial metaphors to describe what actions (in terms of student-student or student-instructor interactions) occur in the writing classroom and beyond; some of these metaphors are more problematic than others. One example of this can be found in contact zone theory, as set forth by Mary Louise Pratt, which has long recognized the classroom as a space where students’ identities and belief systems collide, a space where, for the first time, many students are confronted with views and values that conflict with their own. While the term contact zone suggests a classroom full of “conflict” and “unrest,” Joseph Harris’s term “community,” promotes a kinder, more receptive classroom where students do not “conform” or “negotiate” their values and beliefs, but “reposition” these beliefs in relation to others instituted by their classroom of peers and the academy itself (105).

However, the problem inherent in these functions of the freshmen composition classroom, as Jonathan Mauk has pointed out, is that such theorizations of classroom space ask students to only recognize the classroom as “academic space” (380). In terms of pedagogy, this is evident in the number of composition programs across the country, including our own at UNO,

that ask students to perform analysis and exploration within the classroom, but don't require that they bring these academic tools outside the classroom or campus. As a result, there is a stratification between the world "in here" (the university) and the world "out there"—the worlds that make up our students' lives. A more useful perception of classroom space, as Mauk suggests, introduces a wholly new concept of what defines terms such as "classroom" and "space." For Mauk, the classroom (a term that can easily be substituted for academia) extends beyond the "material surroundings" into "all the directions of being which constitute students' lives" (380). While contact zone and other theories that are currently influencing writing pedagogies across the country (including our own at UNO) account only for students bringing their own discourses into the academy, Mauk calls for a rearranging of academic space to include spaces beyond the college classroom, therefore requiring that students bring the academy with them into these alternate spaces. His classroom is not a place of "conflict" or fostering a false sense of community, it is a place where pedagogy must "fuse various social spaces of students' lives" in order to "better serve their [students'] needs" (382).

Without this "fusion," students may feel "dislocated" from the university and "unconnected" to the community in which the university resides. According to Mauk, this dislocation is a result of their not having a sense of academic space; that is, students are not experiencing academia or the act of learning as occurring in a "knowable place" (i.e. the university), a place to which they must become acclimated. Rather, students experience a constant "movement away" (372) from the university towards other aspects of their lives. Such "dislocation" becomes particularly troublesome for students at the University of New Orleans. Although our students have undoubtedly found some semblance of "normalcy" in returning to New Orleans and their academic careers at UNO after Katrina, they may still experience a sense

of “dislocation,” not yet wholly adjusted to a new New Orleans, or to a very different experience of “campus life” at UNO, students may feel caught between a pre- and post-Katrina world and, in turn, may struggle in locating a sense of purpose. Expanding our students’ conception of what determines academic space to involve their personal lives and the New Orleans community is imperative if we are to reconnect our students to a post-Katrina university and New Orleans community. A pedagogy of “location,” one which not only raises student awareness of the physical location in which they live and learn, but also draws from local resources, asks students to write for local audiences, and engages students in the discourse communities which make up their lives, encourages students to be active participants in multiple “locations” of school and community.

In order for our students to recognize their role as “active participants” in the rebuilding of the University of New Orleans and their home communities, they must first realize how “location,” as in actual “place,” shapes their identities, personal beliefs, and cultures. As previously mentioned, composition classrooms have been viewed as a meeting place of varying discourse communities, where all aspects of a student’s identity coalesce, yet there have not until recently been pedagogies that actually ask students to examine this evident attachment to their home communities. Derek Owens describes the importance for students and teachers to explore the implications of “place” on the human psyche:

Where do I live? Where do you live? What passes for living where we live?

You can...talk to hundreds of students on an annual basis, and yet never really know what these people’s apartments, houses, yards, street blocks, developments and neighborhoods look, feel, and sound like. What impact does this detachment have on one’s teaching? One’s profession? One’s students?...We need to

recognize...that who we are and what we have to say is in so many ways interwoven, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, with our local environs (36-7).

Owens describes a sense of “nowhereness,” a sense that our classrooms (and to a certain degree, our students) are left unconnected to the world and events around them, resulting in students’ feelings of detachment and indifference towards home and university communities. This detachment, Mauk claims, is the result of not realizing the interconnectedness of place and personal identity; for students who feel “detached,” examining place may help them visit the “unconscious” connection between such feelings and the shape of their New Orleans surroundings. The advantage of a curriculum which addresses the “local environs,” the actual surroundings of “where we come from,” is that it allows students to view themselves as people “shaped” by their surroundings, not floating, formless beings uninfluenced by place and time (Owens 37).

As it currently exists, UNO’s curriculum is not so unlike other composition programs across the country in that our courses rarely ask students to explore connections between place, identity, and the act of writing; rather, they fall in line with what Elizabeth Ervin claims as the “current issue” trend in composition studies. The English 1157/1158 sequence, as described in UNO’s *Freshmen English Handbook*, is comprised of courses that are “typically organized around thematic issues, requiring students to read a variety of essays and viewpoints on a topic” with the goal of “develop[ing] the kinds of reading and writing demanded by an academic setting: summarizing, abstracting, comparing, categorizing, synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating” (23). In 1157 and 1158, this is achieved through engaging students in the writing of expository and argumentative prose, with emphasis on the writing process of invention, drafting,

and revision. Clearly, current issue curricula have some advantages: they expose students to a wide range of social, political, and cultural issues (issues that have either indirectly or directly affected their lives) and offer students opportunities to explore multiple perspectives on the same subject. For example, sections of 1157 and 1158 engage students in class discussion regarding cell-phone wars, plastic surgery, the media, education, black fatherhood, and myriad other issues that spur from the readings found in *Reading Matters: A Collection of Readings for Writers* and *Reading Life: A Writer's Reader*, and because the textbooks for freshmen composition are designed “in-house” they are, in some instances, decidedly local. Further, the current issue curriculum at UNO appeals to a wide variety of student interests and majors and, most importantly, ensures that students experience multiple opportunities for writing, enabling them to leave 1158 with the necessary writing skills to succeed at the university level.

Influenced by Nedra Reynolds’ observation that “*where* writing instruction takes place has everything to do with *how*” (20), I propose that UNO’s Freshmen Composition program should offer a more unified, localized, service-centered curriculum, one that allows students to locate themselves at the intersection between a university that is rebuilding and a community that is struggling to do the same. The key to achieving such a goal is to create a writing curriculum that shows our students that writing can be meaningful, powerful, and *active*. Rather than “objectify society,” as Elizabeth Ervin claims as the most severe pitfall of a current issue curriculum, our pedagogies should strive to “foster students’ direct interaction with it” (“Writing for Diverse Publics”). Rather than encouraging students to understand the discussion of and writing about current issues as a classroom only activity, our classrooms should situate writing in other locations, namely spaces beyond the classroom and into campus and local communities. Currently, freshmen composition courses at UNO send the message that academic space exists

only in the classroom (a view that is fast changing in a world of public writing, service learning, and community-centered pedagogies) and therefore writing has little use beyond its four walls. Though we ask our students to write with a purpose in mind, “to write for audiences other than themselves and the teacher” (Freshmen English Handbook 23), the only purpose their writing has is to receive a grade and pass through proficiency—their only audience, the instructor who grades it.

Although in the past, the “current issue” curricula at UNO has served the needs of the university and its students, the situation in post-Katrina New Orleans calls for a rethinking of the current goals for our writing classrooms to a more civic-oriented one. Our post-Katrina situation offers the university the same opportunity Katrina has offered the city of New Orleans, a chance to rebuild, to recreate, and to reassess the needs of a post-Katrina student body. Connecting students back to the campus requires more than reopening the UC, the Cove, or the bookstore. Though the newly reopened spaces on campus represent a return to normalcy after the storm, what is more important is that we adapt to our students new needs and start to (re)connect students to UNO and the community through our writing curricula.

What would a localized pedagogy look like in our composition classrooms at UNO? A localized pedagogy would rely on the “places” and “spaces” where we teach and our students learn and would extend beyond the “spaces” of the classroom to include the city of New Orleans and its surrounding communities. In practice, localized pedagogies might incorporate forms of service learning and public writing in order to give students new meaning and direction as they confront their future in a new New Orleans; while service-learning practices can vary from forms of public writing (perhaps taking shape within the classroom) to a student’s immersion in a full-fledged community outreach program, a common goal of service learning, as suggested by Anne

Ruggles Gere and Aaron Schutz, is to unite students to “respond to a community need with implications for other, more extensive efforts” (141). Public writing and service learning curricula quite literally ask students to connect to their campus and communities and are a good way to enter into these spaces. Further, in a localized pedagogy, students would immerse themselves in the New Orleans’ community, interviewing their co-workers, friends, families, even strangers, and would begin to position themselves in and among ongoing local dialogues through the act of writing. The classroom would become a place where students fuse different aspects of their lives, where students grapple, for instance, with the discursive practices of the local and national media, comparing these modes of interpretation to personal testimonies of local New Orleanians, maybe even their own voices. Readings would celebrate local culture, and students would engage resources within New Orleans, such as local archives or community organizations. Students whose instructors allow them the opportunities could also look for ways to make their writing public either through local publications, campus/community forums, or the Internet. Finally, these writing acts would occur in a classroom space where students and teachers living in FEMA trailer communities meet others whose neighborhoods remain intact; where native New Orleanians meet with students from around the globe; where business, creative writing, art, history, sociology, and urban planning undergraduates practice writing. Perhaps our students can locate themselves in the common goal of repositioning, (re)identifying, and rebuilding relationships to each other and the community.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will review the recent literature on space, place, and composition studies, including the works of Nedra Reynolds, Jonathan Mauk, and Derek Owens, who offer insights into the importance of designing locally relevant curricula in composition classrooms and whose work proposes how writing program administrators and instructors can

adapt program objectives and course assignments to reflect the specific demands that “place” has on “pedagogy.” I will also present the work of Elizabeth Ervin and Ellen Cushman—advocates of service learning, public writing, and civic involvement in the composition classroom—with the goal of suggesting a new platform for UNO’s composition program, for our students, and for our instructors, a platform that recognizes writing as an active tool for creating change.

In the second chapter I will apply the work of these recent theorists to our current situation at the University of New Orleans and more specifically, to our freshmen composition program. Through a presentation of my own pedagogy (implemented in my spring semester’s 1157 courses) and student writing, I will suggest that engaging students in writing about and for their local environments can lead to a deeper understanding of the connections between place and self-identification and can perhaps lead students to other types of localized writing that is community based and action oriented. And, as my goal in this thesis is not only to show the importance of a more localized curriculum through a review of recent literature in the field of location rhetorics and service learning, but to show ways in which UNO composition instructors are already naturally integrating localized pedagogies in the classroom, I will, in closing chapter two, include assignments designed and implemented by composition teachers at various levels of experience and disciplines.

After enumerating how it is that localized assignments can help our instructors prepare UNO students to be better writers, thinkers, and citizens in the post-Katrina world, and how, in turn, these classroom pedagogies can shape a new, more civic-oriented role for the University of New Orleans, I will conclude this thesis by proposing practical ideas that the Freshmen Advisory Council and department administrators may consider useful in supporting instructors who have begun to use localized pedagogies in their classrooms.

CHAPTER 1: Place, Placelessness, and Composition Studies

Rhetoric educators who design service learning curriculums do so by reforming their scholarship, curricula, and pedagogy, and in the process, they become one kind of public intellectual whose specialization is placed in the service of immediate local needs.
–Ellen Cushman from “Beyond Specialization” (172)

Everybody loves their home, we know that. But we love South Louisiana with the ferocity that borders on the pathological. Sometimes we bury our dead in LSU sweatshirts. –from “Who We Are” by Chris Rose, *Times-Picayune*.

I would like to begin chapter one with a review of work by Jonathan Mauk, Derek Owens, Ellen Cushman, and Elizabeth Ervin, all writers and teachers who have dedicated their research to challenging the way we view our students, their experiences, and the changing goals of the writing classroom. Throughout, I will also offer my own particular experiences in applying their theories to my own post-Katrina English 1157 classes. My purpose in presenting their research is 1) to offer a theoretical underpinning to explain the value of localized pedagogies for post-Katrina UNO students; 2) to show an expanding notion of the “spaces” where writing and academics take place to include those beyond the classroom; 3) to show the disconnect between current writing classroom pedagogies and student/community need and how this disconnect leads to “placeless” students; 4) to demonstrate how service learning or community writing activities can counter the “placelessness” a number of students display by accessing the real spaces of their life experiences.

Composition studies, as Nedra Reynolds notes in “Composition’s Imagined Geographies: The Politics of Space in the Frontier, City, and Cyberspace,” has a history of thinking “large,” of conceptualizing, in abstract terms, the spaces where writing, the teaching of writing, and the theorization of writing occurs. Past attempts to theorize writing classrooms in terms of

“imaginary spaces” and legitimize composition as a research field, Reynolds argues, have actually removed composition theorists from the real spaces (and faces) that initially inspired their research—their own classrooms and writing students. For example, imagining the realm of composition studies as a “frontier” (Mina Shaughnessy) or as “borderlands” (Gloria Anzaldua), or in theorizing the classroom as a “contact zone” or “community” becomes problematic when put into practice in the writing classroom, as such terms only attempt to describe in abstraction what actually occurs in the classroom, resulting in writing pedagogies and classroom practices that have become detached from real student experience. Likewise, terms that have a hint of locality, such as “city” to describe an urban university setting, are equally troublesome in that they generalize the experiences and issues students and teachers face in a city setting, lumping all urban environments into one category and positioning the classroom as a microcosm of the proverbial “real world” found beyond its four walls.

Perhaps in response to Reynolds’s call for theorists to “think smaller and more locally” (20) recent theory has dealt not with the “imagined geographies” of composition studies but with the real spaces in which those in our field teach, research, write, and live. Recent collections, such as *City Comp: Identities, Spaces, Practices* illustrate this local turn in composition studies; essays in the collection (edited by Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan) center around issues that are decidedly “urban” and specific to the communities in which its contributors—including teachers Elizabeth Ervin, Dan Collins, David A Jolliffe, and writing program administrator Lenée Lewis Galliet—live and teach, the cities of Wilmington, Chicago, and Atlanta respectively. What results from their work is a clearer understanding not only of how composition courses can best take advantage of the “metro-college” status of their universities, but how each cityscape comes with its own set of challenges to attend. Those writing for the

collection “locate” their research and pedagogy; that is, their work is rooted in a thorough understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, interests, dislikes, politics, and cultural underpinnings of their student body and the specific communities where they teach. In doing so, the authors resist the urge to create presumptions about what teaching in the “city” entails and instead explore pedagogies specific to the needs of their students. What collections such as *City Comp* show composition instructors is that each teaching situation must be tailored. New Orleans is, of course, unique and our teaching experiences here deserve reflection so that instructors can best meet the needs of a post-Katrina student body.

An examination of “place” and its implications on writing instruction as it occurs in our particular writing classrooms, college campuses, and surrounding communities, leads the discipline of rhetoric and composition back to the spaces of classrooms and allows for the creation of localized pedagogies that are better suited to the needs of our students and communities. Because they respond directly to student need, localized pedagogies are service-centered in nature and vary depending on the situation of students, teachers, and the neighboring communities. Further, those implementing localized pedagogies have approached their writing classrooms from various subfields within the discipline of rhetoric and composition and therefore envision different goals (and envision different roles and identities) for the students in their writing classrooms.

Connecting Place, Identity, and Composition Studies

At the center of the debate towards pushing more localized pedagogies in the writing classroom is the realization that there is a gap between university pedagogy and the current (and ever changing) needs of a university’s student body. Metro colleges and commuter-friendly

colleges across the country, such as the University of New Orleans, attract a very different type of student body than universities that institute residency requirements attracting “traditional” full-time students who perhaps have a campus job a few hours a week at the recreation center, but otherwise remain a stone’s throw away from the library, computing center, gym, student government offices, evening lectures, poetry readings, and campus clubs. In contrast, “non-traditional” students (itself a problematic term that suggests commuting, working, parenting students are somehow a lesser breed, a lesser form of student, when, in fact their juggling act is just short of miraculous) who might drive to campus during their lunch break to visit the writing center, who might bring their children to office hours, or who might type their papers on their employers’ computers, are clearly experiencing learning and the act of writing very differently than their traditionally schooled counterparts; writing between shifts, writing between classes, writing whenever students can find some spare time is hardly affording them the experience of writing as a process, but rather as a series of stops and starts, rendering, as Jonathan Mauk states, that particular piece of “traditional wisdom of writing pedagogy . . . useless” (373). Yet, despite the number of “non-traditional” students and the universities and colleges that pride themselves on catering to the needs of a working, commuting student body, the curriculum of many freshmen writing programs, including our own at UNO, is tailored more to the “traditional” student, namely because teaching process theory, offering issue based curricula, and testing writing through proficiency exams assumes that students have the time and space to write in traditionally academic “places” on campus, and will do little of their writing (or writing preparation) beyond the campus itself.

However, Mauk, among other theorists I will review in this chapter, illustrates that composition studies is increasingly focused on exploring the reasons for this disconnect between

pedagogy and student experience and on suggesting ways to better connect the two. In “Location, Location, Location: The ‘Real’ (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition” Mauk articulates what he views as an “increasing disintegration of traditional academic space and the apparent placelessness of many new college students” (370). On the campus of his imagined Gordon Community College, Mauk observes a majority population of working, commuting, and overall “non-traditional” students (similar to our student population at UNO) as being “unsituated in academic space” as “academic space is not an integral part of their intellectual geography.” Mauk credits this spatial confusion to his students’ “constant movement away from campus,” a movement in and out of other “geographies” that make up their lives—the real work spaces, communities, and personal identities that represent the comings and goings of their everyday lives (369). Showing up for classes and tending to the needs of academia (observing attendance policies, engaging writing as a process, even staying awake for class) is only one aspect of their daily schedule. This constant centrifugal force away from campus becomes problematic for teachers at Gordon Community College, who feel the need to constantly compete for their students’ attention in “academic matters.” Students, as Mauk puts it, are not “buying it” and remain floating entities, constantly flying “in-between” school and life.

The college campus Mauk describes is not unlike many “non-traditional” colleges and universities across America, including our own University of New Orleans, where, as educators, we compete with employers, children, and other personal matters for our students’ undivided attention to the academy. In fact, on several occasions our *Freshmen English Program Handbook* clearly states that the goals for English 1157 and 1158 are to help students effectively write for an *academic* audience. For example, the principle of the program as a whole is to “assure the University community that students are writing at a level *appropriate to a university*

environment” (6); descriptions of 1157 state that students “interact” with various topics in “reading, writing, and discussion in assignments *that develop the kinds of reading and writing demanded by an academic setting*: summarizing, abstracting, comparing, categorizing, synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating” (23); 1158 “should build on the types of writing that were practiced in 1157 *and that are common in an academic setting*” (all italics mine 30). Within these guidelines, the standards are set for the “proficiency” exam, which tests a student’s literacy in terms of the academy. The types of writing that are determined “academic” are also noted. According to the handbook, meeting the goals of the university is best achieved through argumentative and persuasive writing, through papers that demonstrate an “assertive thesis,” are “adequately developed,” “have variety in transitions,” etc., etc. Such requirements for “successful” writing (argumentative, five-paragraph essays) represent only a small portion of the demands our university places on its students in freshmen composition, and establish what is important for the academic integrity of the university even if such standards compete with students’ experiences; such requirements are the reason why there is such a huge gap between our curriculum and the lives of our students (especially in a post-Katrina New Orleans.) Of course, we want our students to succeed within the university setting, but can’t we also help them to successfully use their writing in other important spaces? The course objectives for 1157 and 1158 indicate the goal “to write from personal [i.e. real world] experience” but it is clearly subordinate to teaching the discourse of academic writing and is, in practice, often ignored altogether (understandably so) as instructors focus on preparing their students for the proficiency exam.

And though our system rewards those who can adapt to academic life, our low retention rate suggests that the majority cannot do so successfully. Though UNO has a majority student

body of “non-traditional students,” our academic goals for the writing classroom, including the types of writing we ask our students to produce to meet these goals, are not in line with “non-traditional” student experience. For students who spend most of their time working in other capacities such as mother, father, business owner, construction worker, film intern, part-time burger-flipper, educators, etc., or who are attending online courses and who are not in a “traditional” classroom environment, we may consider finding writing activities that ask them to write both for the academy and for those other spaces that occupy their lives—for the other communities of which they are a part. Ultimately, our curricula can ask students to write for the academy *and* for other “geographies,” to better their writing skills for their Biology, History, or Music Theory courses, but also to use the writing and critical thinking skills we teach them in freshmen composition for the betterment of their home communities.

What Mauk suggests, and what I agree with in regards to our student population at UNO, is that students who lack a sense of academic space, who, in other words, do not have a concept of college as being an “experience” in and of itself, feel a sense of placelessness which is exacerbated by university curricula that attempt to *solely* “orientate” or “introduce” students to campus and academic life. It seems that the age-old debate between David Batholomae and Peter Elbow over how educators might begin to “locate” students to the ways of the academy, or even if we must do so at all, still resonates today with instructors and composition theorists. For Mauk, the solution requires that students experience a rearranging of academic space:

What must happen for students such as those at Gordon ... is a change in the metaphysics of *where*. Students need to conceive the space outside of the campus, outside of the classroom, as academic. And the academic space needs to be conceived as transportable and mutable—as something that is tied to being,

rather than to exclusive material surroundings. In other words, what it means to be a student and what it means to be in an academic space need to converge—rather literally. And in that convergence, both entities will be changed. (380)

If we wish the best for our students' college experience, we need to expand their and our notions of academic space to include the other multiple geographies of their lives, the "other places which [draw] students away from college" (372). As Mauk so urgently suggests, not only must we change the way we theorize the act of writing and the role of the freshmen composition course, but we need to change our approach to teaching writing in "non-traditional" settings.

Mauk posits an exciting place for composition studies in terms of curriculum reform in the writing classrooms of our colleges and universities. If a student's sense of "dislocation" filters into the writing classroom, as Mauk suggests it does, if students who struggle with locating themselves within an academic space also struggle with the act of writing, we need to "recast the classroom as the place wher(ever) the student is carrying out the practices of writing" (385). Composition programs, then, when designing a core curriculum, must take into account the changing topography and demographics of our universities to include the multiple geographies and identities of our students. College might serve a better purpose for our students if, as teachers, we resist the urge to "orient" them to some less tangible academic realm, and instead help them view the social spaces of their lives beyond college as spaces for learning and writing by "plac[ing] students within assignments" (Mauk 379).

Applying Mauk's theory to my own pre-existing (and pre-Katrina) 1157 syllabus was rather straightforward; "plac[ing] students within assignments" (379) did not require an entire transformation of the course, its structure, or its specific writing requirements, but only a slight makeover. For example, I assigned an argument essay that required students 1) to choose their

own topic based on their own experiences; 2) to form a thesis; and 3) to use various resources, including library research as well as “local research” (i.e. testimonials/opinions/interviews from neighbors, their family, local soda can collectors, the Quarter’s gutter punks, etc.) to support their claims. More specifically, one student, who, after being forced to leave her Labrador Retriever behind when the shelter she stayed at outside of Baton Rouge refused to take animals, argued for more leniency in the “pet evacuation” system to allow owners to evacuate with their pets. Her resources not only included reports by animal rights groups and news articles from local and national papers in the library database (a worthy selection from an academic standpoint) but also the experiences (and *opinions*) of her elderly neighbor who, a week after the storm, finally made his way to the airport, where he had to leave his dog with the LA/SPCA in order to evacuate himself. He never saw his pet again. This student also drew from conversations with her local manicurist who left her cockatiels behind in her shop only to find them dead upon her return. These assignments, inspired by the work of Mauk and the effects of Hurricane Katrina, are demanding of students in very different ways than standard 1157 prompts designed with a strictly academic agenda in mind. No longer are students writing for the academy, but they are expanding academic space by using academic tools (i.e., research, writing and analytical skills) to engage with issues and opinions beyond the institution itself.

Other theorists have also shown concern regarding college curricula that ignore the significance of place and thus exacerbate the discordance between pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in universities and colleges and the needs of students and local communities. Ellen Cushman, in her groundbreaking essay, “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change,” draws a clear picture of how universities and colleges have isolated themselves “socially and sometimes physically” (8) from the communities of students they seek to serve by providing

descriptions and photos of “The Approach,” a set of stairs that stands in disrepair and marks the entranceway to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute from the city of Troy—a structure which represents the deteriorating relationship between the college and the working-class community of which it is a part. Further, according to Derek Owens, the “social” and “physical” detachment many universities have from their communities filters into the curriculum:

Curriculum, which at least in theory is the intellectual glue of the academic institution, is ethereal, abstract, and detached from the local universe of surrounding neighborhoods, from the students’ and employees’ neighborhoods, and from the campus itself. (72)

One assignment that has relatively little connection to the “local universe” that surrounds our students and university but is particularly popular in first-year writing classrooms across the country, including our own, is the ad/image analysis, of which major style and companion guides (such as *Prentice Hall* and *The Everyday Writer*) and our very own *Reading Life* dedicate entire chapters. In *Reading Life* this “thematic unit” introduces students to “Writing about Images” and includes a rather detailed “art lesson” that gives students definitions of terms such as “LINE,” “SHAPE,” “VALUE,” “COLOR,” “TEXTURE,” and “COMPOSITION” followed by an Ad Analysis assignment and a “Color Image Gallery” consisting of artwork from Norman Rockwell and photos by Annie Leibovitz, among others. Even in this semester’s attempt to “localize” the ad analysis for my 1157 classes, by asking students to analyze local ads geared towards victims of the storm or New Orleanians in general, the assignment had nothing to do with community and neighborhoods. Further, I don’t believe any of my students saw the purpose or benefits that came from analyzing the strategies of advertisers beyond their receiving another grade in a college-level writing course. A better idea for my post-Katrina classroom would have been to

ask my students to take a picture of a place (a restaurant, City Park, a friend's house, etc.) that held memories for them prior to Katrina and to write a detailed description of this place as they remembered it; they might then reflect on how this place has changed for them, either physically, mentally, or both. Such an image analysis would perhaps lead students in an exploration of place and its effect on one's being, exactly the kind of analysis Owens wishes his students to partake in. As I will explain in the next section, this understanding of place and identity would also establish the foundation for a pedagogy of location.

Space, Place, and Being

One assumption that is central to Mauk's pedagogy and to a pedagogy of place that is also apparent in the work of Owens and Cushman, is the idea of an academic space that is "transportable," "mutable," and "tied to being" rather than "material spaces" (380); there exists a dialectical relationship between an individual and a particular location, in that a particular place shapes one's being, and conversely, that one's being has the potential to shape place. By drawing from research in materiality, body, and writing (as found in the work of composition theorist, Kristie Fleckenstein), Mauk is able to articulate the inextricable bond between an individual and place. Summarizing Fleckenstein's work, he notes,

The individual is the intersection of place and practice, is the here and now of the place. That is, the individual experiences immersion within a place and the practices that define it as different from some other place (for example, her home town two hours from campus). (375)

This "immersion" within a place to the extent that it has defined one's being, then, needs to be explored in the writing classroom—a new "place" where students enter from other "places"

(geographies) of being, with varying opinions, differences, and ways of understanding the world around them. Yet, despite this clear connection between place and being, as Derek Owens notes, “the local places that students and staff and faculty go home to after leaving the university behind remain largely invisible, supposedly unrelated to the activity of the academy” (70). Through a lens of sustainability, Derek Owens suggests a new role for educators, one that is mindful of the deep connections between locality and identity.

Educators have a responsibility to help students discover the kind of self-worth that comes with being amazed at one’s local worlds. . .we must provide them with a vocabulary with which they might critique their environments and develop an awareness of what exactly it is about one’s environment that can make a person miserable, bored, angry, tired, scared, depressed. Environment not as separate but as extensions of themselves. (69)

For Owens, it is imperative that students see for themselves the connection between place and identity. In order for students to explore this connection, Owens calls for a classroom which asks students to begin by writing about the environments in which they live and work—not, he notes, as an exercise in “local color” (37) but as a reflection of how place shapes identity.

For New Orleanians or Louisianans who evacuated after the storm and took up temporary residences in other parts of the country, the connections between place and identity became very real. As Southern Louisianans were scattered throughout other peoples’ cities, towns, homes, places of employment, colleges, and universities, suddenly their identities were held in contrast to those of the people and places whose “space” they occupied. Editorials testifying to the unique identities of Louisianans were published in national newspapers; columnist Chris Rose, in the *Times-Picayune*, introduced the South Louisianans to the nation during those early days after

the storm and captured peoples’ “resiliency,” “stubborn ways,” our tendencies to “laugh too loud” and “live too large.” Their identities as New Orleanians or Louisianans no doubt became more salient as they were suddenly thrust into new communities. Also, though sometimes few and far between, Louisianans united across the nation in a bond of solidarity and pride—they defended their city when it came under fire of the media and federal government officials who knew little about the local terrain and its culture. I believe that our students, as well as ourselves, returned to New Orleans with a more distinct sense of how this place has written us. As instructors, we might, then, use this momentum from Katrina to engage identity issues in the classroom.

Most students may have a sense of how growing up or living in certain communities has shaped who they are and how they view the world. For example, in my career I’ve had a handful of students whose personal emails proudly stated coonass@yahoo.com or some other form of the “redneck” variation and who, when given the opportunity, could take you on an imaginary journey through the bayous and waterways of their home parishes. By fostering an awareness of how place and identity are intertwined, we may be able to instill in our students a sense of ownership in the way their neighborhoods, workspaces, and other geographies are shaped. As Owens writes, “without this fundamental awareness of why places are the way they are and why they have these effects upon us, it will be difficult to imagine ways of reconstructing them” (70). Considering that New Orleans is “under construction,” our students at UNO, many of whom will continue to live and work in the city for years to come, need to begin viewing themselves as active members of the community who can participate in the (re)creation of the places in which they live.

What the work of Mauk, Owens, and Cushman amounts to is a change in the relationships between universities and the communities of which they are a part and a renewed sense that somehow our students are intermediaries between academic space and the surrounding geographies that make up their lives; it is through our students, then, that UNO, a university that already claims a clearly urban mission, can reach out to the area as it rebuilds in the years to come. In the next section, I will explore how it is that freshmen composition instructors can aid students in this transformation from student to “citizen-writer” (394), a term theorist Elizabeth Ervin uses in reference to her students, and a role we might consider for our own students at UNO.

Students as Intermediaries between University and Community

No other movement in composition studies quite literally asks students to view themselves as mediators between the university and the community than those freshmen programs advocating service learning. The Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership (CCELL)¹ out of Louisiana State University, the flagship for the University of New Orleans and a model for other schools within the state university system, offers the following as its mission statement for multi-disciplinary service learning offerings:

a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course

¹ The CCELL office at LSU literally connects the university to the Baton Rouge community, acting as the liaison between community organizations and LSU classrooms. The office offers faculty resources from syllabi development and course/student evaluations to conferences on service learning; they assist students in service learning orientation and methods of reflection; and, most importantly, facilitate seminars and activities for faculty and the community organizations with which they are affiliated.

content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Louisiana State University 1)

What is inherent in this definition of service learning is the reciprocity between student and community—the idea that each entity can offer the other something valuable. The student uses his or her skills in order to provide service for a community and “address” a community need. In turn, the community experience, when reflected upon, offers the student a “further understanding of course content,” an “appreciation” of the discipline, and further a “sense of civic responsibility.” Finally, LSU’s mission statement for service learning is directed to all disciplines—to any instructor who wishes to implement a service learning component into his or her classroom. However, as Anne Ruggles Gere and Aaron Schutz have noted, “service learning has found an especially comfortable home in composition studies” where “for instructors . . . who wish to provide a venue for students to connect with the situated complexities of issues and communities outside the classroom, service learning provides a ready and practical solution” (130). Likewise, Bruce Herzberg another leading supporter, defends service learning in the composition classroom:

The effort to reach into the composition class with a curriculum aimed at democracy and social justice is an attempt to make schools function . . . as radically democratic institutions, with the goal of making individual students more successful, but also of making better citizens, citizens in the strongest sense of those who take responsibility for communal welfare. These efforts belong in the composition class because of the rhetorical as well as the practical nature of citizenship and social transformation. (317)

Yet, despite the virtues of service learning, mission statement rhetoric that underlies LSU's and many other service learning missions across the country has come under fire, most of the shots coming from the very same leaders in the service learning "movement." At the center of this controversy is a question set forth by Gere and Schutz: "*How* we step outside the classroom, how we enter into service learning relationships with communities beyond our own, will be crucial in determining our success" (147). In response to "how" service learning should operate in the writing classroom, theorists such as Cushman, Reynolds, and Donna M. Bickford² have begun by suggesting how *not* to enter into the neighborhood associations, community centers, and non-profits that surround our universities. Many of these scholars are critical of any form of service learning that engages students in random acts of voyeurism where students merely enter into some alien or "other" community to observe and reflect on difference, ultimately leading to a further separation and isolation between students, the university, and the communities in which they initially sought a connection.

The "forced nature" of service learning has also been scrutinized by the sheer number of university students who are required to take service learning courses for "credits." Also, the public's perception of community service (that community service is a type of punishment for bad behavior) has led theorists to label it a "punishing pedagogy" (Bickford and Reynolds 231). The most recent media coverage of actress Michelle Rodriguez's drunk driving sentence comes to mind, as Rodriguez actually chose 65 hours of jail time over 240 hours of community service. Even the "volunteering" nature of service learning is to be criticized, as volunteer work can potentially exacerbate the separation between those in "need" of intervention and those offering aid. And finally, even in its purest form, when service learning fosters a "reciprocal"

² Specifically, Cushman's "Sustainable Service Learning Programs," "Beyond Specialization: The Public Intellectual, Outreach, and Rhetoric Education," "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change" and Reynolds' and Bickfords' "Activism and Service Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent"

relationship between a university student and a community, at semester's end, the community project is completed, and a service learning activity dissolves into an act of hit and run (Cushman, "Sustainable Service Learning Programs" 41).

As these same theorists would note, there are, however, many successful ways to "do" service learning. One way is envisioning service learning as "public" as Gere and Schutz have done or as "activism" as Bickford and Reynolds have done. In "Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students: Or, Why Composition Class Should be More like a Bowling Team," Elizabeth Ervin draws from this idea of service as an act of citizenship in planning her own composition courses and outlines the importance of engaging students in acts of public discourse as a means for enacting change within the local and global communities that surround the universities they attend. In her work, she notes that envisioning service learning as "'public' service learning" (as Gere and Schutz have done) is particularly useful for moving today's composition curricula, which tend to be mostly "issue-based" (Ervin), into the next century, or as Mauk might suggest, towards a rearranging of academic space. Ervin surmises that despite the stoic acts of writing instructors and current-issue texts to encourage public discourse by recasting the *classroom* as public space (that is, the space where public issues get addressed) unless these acts of public writing enact change or create action towards change beyond the classroom space, (say, in the form of letters to the editor or publications)—students will continually fail to recognize their role as active participants, mostly because issue-based writing curriculums (such as our current system at UNO which asks students to delve into "Reading Matters" such as "Community," "Pop-Culture," and "Education") create a more "voyeuristic relationship between students and their world, in which reading, analyzing, discussing and writing in composition class are equivalent to intervening, acting, and participating in the real world" (Ervin 385). The

problem, Ervin cites, is that composition texts, the overall structure of composition courses, and the “tradition of liberal education” (385) treat the classroom as a microcosm of the world “out there,” giving teachers and students alike the idea that acting in the classroom is akin to acting in public spheres. Thus, the good intentions of the issue-based classroom to facilitate class discussion and introduce students to varying points of view of, say, the topic of “abortion” or “gun control,” remain only a façade for real involvement. The role of professors then, is not to treat the classroom as the space where “false” actions occur, but to create opportunities for students to participate in public issues; in her words, “civic involvement—discursive or otherwise— . . . doesn’t just happen; it requires models of such behavior and structured opportunities for participating in it” (Ervin 384).

In 1991 LSU English professors Suzanne and Wade Dorman provided such opportunities for their students when, as part of a grant, they began teaching the first service-learning classes at the institution, thus taking a part in what theorists (including Ervin) have termed the service learning “movement” in higher education (LSU News Online). Soon university administrators, seeing the value in service learning classrooms from a “real-world” standpoint, began offering incentives and aid to instructors who designed and taught service learning courses in their fields. Today, besides the standard offering of English 1001/1002, LSU’s equivalent of UNO’s 1157/1158 courses, students are able to choose from service learning writing courses under the subheadings: “Literacy and Community” in connection with Highland Elementary and taught by Bobbi Pary, “Community, Power, and Perspective” in collaboration with Connections for Life, a non-profit organization helping women in poverty transition from dependent to independent living, and taught by Sharon Andrews, “Writing For the Community” in connection with the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Info Center and taught by Deborah Normand, and finally,

“Animal-Human Bond” with the Animal Control Center taught by Claire Dixon. Faculty are able to shape their individual courses with varying levels of service learning; for example, some students are offered the option to perform on-site work, such as tutoring or determining the needs of the organization, while others are asked to use class time to create the types of writing assistance these organizations need, which may involve the writing of grant proposals, press releases, letters to the community, news articles, etc. Of course, students are still being asked to generate prose; there is a required position essay similar to UNO’s argument emphasis, and a profile essay among others, all of which can be easily adapted to service learning sections, or to a general first-year English course oriented towards public writing (not all freshmen composition courses at LSU are required to have a service learning component.) For an example of the assignments’ versatility, consider the profile essay, which asks students to “write a Profile of a person or a place (or a person and place) that . . . would interest LSU students or Baton Rouge readers” and to write the “kind of essay” that could be submitted to the campus newspaper *The Reveille* or *The Tiger Weekly*, periodicals that, as the profile assignment notes, “frequently feature articles profiling a person or place” (Louisiana State University English). The assignment also asks students to consider a larger audience—the Baton Rouge community, by suggesting writing for *The Advocate*, *Country Road* and the *Indie Journal*. The “subject” of the profile is a “person or place” that is “unfamiliar” to the student, and students are required to complete interviews and observations to shape their writing (Louisiana State University English). Such a writing assignment as mentioned above is very adaptable to a classroom that is grounded in service learning, where students perhaps profile the community center with which their course is in partnership; without the service learning component, this assignment is still decidedly local,

where students interview and observe spaces beyond the university and bring their observations into the public domain of campus and local newspapers.

I present LSU not as a model for how the University of New Orleans should shape their freshmen writing program (LSU and UNO are very different universities, each faced with its own unique challenges and surrounded by vastly different local scenes) but to demonstrate that there are many ways to engage students in a localized pedagogy, whether it is through public writing, service learning, or engaging in writing activities for and with the community. LSU's program embodies the work of Mauk, Owens, Cushman, and Ervin, and illustrates how "public" service learning takes many forms (and many forms of writing) and offers boundless rewards for universities, instructors, students, and communities. The virtues of service learning and public writing pedagogies reveal that real writing and real learning take place every day and everywhere.

Further, I refer to LSU's program because I believe UNO students would benefit from a similar curriculum. Our students would be particularly good service learners because they are constantly moving in and between "school" and the "communities" where they live; they are (for the most part) "locals" themselves, and therefore represent the population and communities of Southern Louisiana. Thus, there is little chance of their creating a "voyeuristic" scene in service learning endeavors and little chance that their actions will turn into a scene of "hit and run." For our writing classrooms at UNO, applying some of LSU's writing pedagogies means that individual instructors begin to create layered assignments asking students to engage in writing about and for their communities and the people within these communities and to explore (from the angle of curriculum development) how other types of writing (writing beyond "argumentative" and "expository" prose) are also worthy academic writing pursuits.

Finally, as individual instructors begin to delve into the service learning and public writing arena, it will be increasingly important that they be supported (departmentally and university wide) in their endeavors, a note recognized by theorists as well as LSU's service learning model. Having a department exclusively dedicated to service learning (such as the CCELL office at LSU) is an invaluable resource but there are other, more immediate solutions (as I suggest in the conclusion) that can be readily applied to the writing program at the University of New Orleans.

My students vocalize, with the same intensity, what they celebrate about New Orleans and what they would change, and if given more writing and service learning opportunities to do so, I believe they would actively participate. In my own attempts to integrate a more localized pedagogy into my 1157 courses this semester, I still failed, at times, to model civic involvement for my students and to create opportunities for them to participate in public forums. For example, a sequence of community writings began with my asking students what their vision was for a "new" New Orleans, which led to an intense discussion that left me wishing one of them would join the race for mayor. This discussion was followed by assigned readings, including testimonials from local residents, recent *Times Picayune* articles, and a pamphlet entitled "Eight Principles for a Better New Orleans," created by and distributed to the public by a local grassroots organization. After a week of discussing the issues and readings, students sat for a timed in-class essay (one of the requirements for 1157) where they were asked to argue, in their opinion, what the most important "principles" were (as stated in the pamphlet) for rebuilding the city. In an ideally localized classroom that drew from service learning and community writing practices, my students would be the one's designing that pamphlet; as a group, they had developed similar ideas as presented in the pamphlet and improved upon others. Yet, for all the

fervor that went into our classroom debates, the most intense discussions of the semester, all energy was funneled into one in-class essay that only I, the teacher, would ever see.

Rather, “public” service learning activities ensure that there is less conflict between our students’ academic lives and the lives they live beyond the university; through acts of public writing our students may begin to see how their roles as students can inform their roles as citizens, mothers, fathers, business owners, and employees. Further, as Owens notes, a classroom space that pays attention to locality “lets students know that the status of their communities is not something beyond the proper domain of the academy, but a vital part of the curriculum” (76). How it is that writing instructors at the University of New Orleans can begin to engage the community in their classrooms will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2: Where Y'at, UNO?

We're all whacked...How could you not be? Consider the sights, sounds and smells you encounter on a daily basis as you drive around a town that has a permanent bathtub ring around it. I mean, could somebody please erase that brown line? –from “Are We Nuts” on the mental state of New Orleanians by Chris Rose, Times-Picayune

Higher learning aims upward, away from the mundane, the everyday, the provincial. We see this represented literally in the number of colleges and universities intentionally built on hills, rising above surrounding communities. What we need more of is lower learning, thinking that keeps bringing us back to the local conditions of the communities that we and our students return to once we leave the classroom. –Derek Owens in Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation (75)

In an attempt to “think smaller and more locally” (Reynolds 20), and to engage in what Owens defines as “lower learning,” I would like to begin this chapter with a physical description of the UNO campus and its surrounding areas as a means for locating the significance of place and curriculum and as a warrant for more localized writing pedagogies at the University of New Orleans.

As a “higher learning” institution, the University of New Orleans is not typical of the colleges and universities Owens addresses in his call for “lower learning;” not literally (a *hill* in New Orleans?) and not in its mission statement.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS is the university of a new, revitalized New Orleans partnership with Louisiana and the world for the 21st Century that is committed to habits of creative discovery; committed to standards of rigorous learning for all our students, faculty, and staff; and committed to practices of responsive engagement with the needs of our students and our community (Fact Book 11).

The language of the mission statement, particularly the last remarks regarding the University's commitment to students and community, brings to mind a university that is connected to the local lives of those it serves. Physically, UNO's main campus, located in the Lakefront area of New Orleans, offers no grand entrance into its college walls, unless, of course, one considers this semester's FEMA community (nestled within the old playing fields) grandiose. While there are a few residence halls (and FEMA trailers) slowly opening their doors to students, much of our student body commutes. Because of this, there is plenty of space to park; the campus is squared in by parking lots and service roads, and traffic flow increases during the hours when classes are beginning and ending. UNO's satellite campuses located across greater New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana bring the university to the suburbs and surrounding areas, helping students to more easily gain course credits through the university's Metropolitan College. Needless to say, we are not the ivory tower university of New Orleans—an institution that stands as an ominous fortress yielding DO NOT ENTER signs. The university's long standing open admissions policy (terminated only recently) and the fact that UNO was the only New Orleans university to reopen its doors at Jefferson Center and through online courses in October after Katrina, are testaments to the school's unique urban mission.

A drive (or walk) around the campus finds FEMA trailers, empty and waiting to be occupied by students and teachers; whole buildings remain closed; student hang-outs such as The Cove, the RISS Athletic Center, and the Business Administration building among others still await FEMA inspections. The Liberal Arts Building, where the English Department is housed, opened the day before the start of the spring semester with no running water and signs of vandalism in the form of smashed windows, ransacked offices, and tipped over vending machines. During spring break, the campus was scattered with students from colleges and

universities around the country, in the city for Katrina aid, cleaning up some last scraps of debris that the hurricane left behind. Student government and other clubs and sports teams on campus have done their part this semester to return UNO students to some semblance of normalcy by holding gatherings, pep rallies, and most recently, the annual SUCbAUF (Students United for Crawfish, beer And Unprecedented Fun) in the green space at the center of campus. Classes continue, some held in a temporary classroom set up near the Student Center. Across campus, these scenes are accompanied by the incessant pounding of the Corps' machinery reinforcing the levee walls that line the London Avenue Canal, a sound with which no pep rally, live band, or professor's lecture could compete: a very real reminder that Katrina is still with us, and that another hurricane season is right around the corner.

When the Lakefront campus reopened for classes, Elysian Fields, the once busy main drag that leads into the Lakefront campus, was dead; wholly unrecognizable. Though I knew the neighborhood had been flooded (just like everyone else, I had seen the news, heard from friends who had lived in the neighborhood and lost everything) it was difficult to realize just how devastating the damage could be until I witnessed it first hand. Lake Ponchartrain had pushed its way into peoples' bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens, spilling their insides out of broken down doors and shattered windows, settling clothes, dolls, footballs, sneakers, busted chairs, and table legs on the front stoops. A few homeowners had been back to sift through their remains, creating well-kept, orderly piles separated into trash, timber, and metals, a final attempt to create order out of chaos, to regain control over an uncontrollable situation. Others returned only to board up what was left of their homes, spray painting "Do Not Enter" warnings (or what Douglas Brinkley terms in his recent work *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* as "street blogging"); in an attempt to keep their good humor, one

homeowner asked “Are we in Good Hands?” across a board where their front door used to be. It seemed that many others had not yet returned, realizing there was not much left to return to.

And this is only one street of one neighborhood, in a city that was 80% under water.

For the rest of the semester, as I commuted to and from classes at UNO, I tried to keep my eyes focused on the road and not the water lines that marked the homes and businesses lining Elysian Fields, on the stop signs (which had replaced the traffic lights) and not the dead and tangled masses of trees and shrubs that were once peoples’ front yards and gardens, on reviewing the day’s 1157 lesson plan in my head and not shifting my focus to the infamous “X” brandings that marked each building, a sign that rescue groups had entered, the dates of those entries nearly two weeks after the break in the London Avenue Canal.

Unlike much of the surrounding Lakeview and Gentilly neighborhoods, UNO was relatively spared the wrath of Katrina. One of my students described the campus, as ravaged as it seemed then, as an “oasis.” UNO is somewhat of a haven for many students; the university has enabled them to come back to school, to retain some normalcy from their pre-Katrina life. One student told me she looked forward to class so she could escape the hotel room in Metairie, her temporary home after the storm, where she was living with her three cousins, her eight-month old baby, and her mother and father. But between commuting to class, taking care of her family, finding a more permanent home, and dealing with insurance over the loss of her childhood home, this student, like many others, dropped the course and all other courses entirely. Unforeseen victims of Katrina. The fact remains that though many students have found it comforting to return to academics at UNO, many, more so than ever, are finding the demands of an education very challenging and, at times, completely unmanageable.

One needs only to study or teach at UNO, experience life in one of the residence halls, commute to campus, or live in a FEMA trailer to experience the influence place has on the human psyche—and to identify how UNO is especially unlike the “ivory tower” universities in New Orleans, namely Loyola and Tulane, in mission and purpose, during post-Katrina times. These universities, especially Tulane, were hit hard during Katrina, but today their students can still retreat to the relatively unscathed area of Uptown, drawing upon the normalcy of that area to isolate themselves in their studies. In contrast, UNO students (and instructors) do not have that privilege, and are constantly surrounded by remnants of Katrina, as our campus location places us in the middle of the wreckage—physically and mentally. Also, unlike students at schools like Tulane and Loyola, the majority of our student body will remain in and around New Orleans for years to come, maybe even their entire lives. If, as a university, we wish to remain true to our urban mission, we must give our students academic tools to live and work in a new New Orleans, one that our students have helped to shape. We must envision our students as intermediaries between the academy and the changing New Orleans community, which they inhabit each day.

Here is, perhaps, a better illustration of what I’m suggesting: Our students literally navigate through a New Orleans that is visibly scarred and each scene they pass reeks of a recent, nagging history and history in the making. They drive past local haunts such as the Circle Food Store on Claiborne and Molly’s on the Market that are now nationally recognizable thanks to American Red Cross commercials and Anderson Cooper; students drive past the Superdome, where, from I-10 you can see construction workers harnessed together by a pulley, fixing the roof so the Saints can come home in October 2007; en route to the Quarter, they drive the length of the Morial Convention Center reminding them of the inadequacies of federal response teams and issues of racial inequity in this city; students commuting to school from FEMA trailers in

towns like Mareux, drive through dead neighborhood after dead neighborhood—Chalmette, Arabi, the Lower Ninth—and wonder if anyone at all was truly spared. Conversely, for those stuck in Uptown traffic, Katrina may be merely an afterthought. Our students drive through a city where history continues to be made, where in April civil rights groups led by Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, joined the Hip Hop Caucus, the Black Leadership Foundation, the women of NOW, community activists, local artists, professors, and college students, Bill Cosby, and Al Sharpton, in crossing the Crescent Street Connection in what UNO History Professor Michael Mizell-Nelson, calls “one of the most significant civil rights’ protests in American history” (personal communication). The Superdome, the battered neighborhoods, the Crescent City Connection—each of these spaces is attached to an event. No one understands that “material spaces have a political edge” (Reynolds 20) more than New Orleanians do. From the site (and “sight”) of Mayor Nagin’s imposing campaign billboard (as he stares out over the mold-infested, rotting homes in Gentilly) to the polling places still wrapped in FEMA tarps, we are a damaged city and a damaged people, nearly a year after the storm.

Yet, students also witness scenes of rebuilding, of hope, and rebirth, where neighbors help each other rebuild homes, where local community groups are feeding stray animals, picking up trash around the city, and where many of our students are part of such groups themselves. If UNO wants to truly be a university of its mission, to be “committed to practices of responsive engagement with the needs of our students and our community,” do we not need to engage our students in “rebuilding” activities that seek to bring the Old New Orleans back and improve the future? The “stuff” (politics?) of material spaces which our students move in and between in their daily routines can and should become the fodder for discussion and writing in the classroom. How can we ignore this opportunity and ask our students to check this “material” at

the door (and with it all opportunities for getting our students involved in the community) and instead assign an out of class essay in which students give a detailed “description of the subject matter” in Norman Rockwell’s “After the Prom” and “write a paper in which [they] analyze the meaning of the picture” (Reading Life 90). Such an assignment is out of sync with our student’s daily experiences, when most students would benefit much more by engaging local issues in their writing.

However, getting our students to see the material world around them as opportunities for writing or participating in their academic and local communities is another story. Just because I’m inspired by the limitless possibilities for my 1157 syllabus as I bike around the city (I have become obsessed with local news channels, *The Times Picayune*, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and body art that has emerged post-Katrina and their potential for discussion and analysis) this doesn’t mean my students share the same fervor. I will not be the first teacher to admit that my students are not exactly up to date with current events, but then again, our writing classrooms don’t always ask them to be. Our students need to see that we as educators believe current events and the city of New Orleans are important enough to be included in everyday class discussion, writing assignments, etc. Put it this way: Considering the state of our University and the Greater New Orleans area, do we need more students in this city who can discuss an “artist[s] use [of] light and color” and the “arrange[ment] of lines and shapes in the composition” of a picture that appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1957, or do we need more of what Elizabeth Ervin coins “citizen-writers” (394), students who are abreast of local needs and concerns and use their writing for the betterment of the communities surrounding them?

At this point, it might be useful for me to describe my own attempts at a localized pedagogy from my Spring 2006 1157 courses. First, however, allow me to provide a few brief

disclosures: The assignments are only part of what I have in mind for a real localized pedagogy. I draw from Mauk, Owens, and public writing/service learning theorists in that I ask students to 1) draw from resources from their places of work, neighborhoods, etc. that make up their everyday travels, 2) engage them in writing about place and community with a vision of change, and 3) ask them to read about current events in the classroom and use class time for discussion and debate. I was unable to fully engage them in service learning or community action writing, which I consider to be an important part of a localized pedagogy; service learning and writing for the community need to be departmentally supported in order for them to be fully successful, as the types of writing required for our freshmen composition courses differ from the kinds of writing that may appear in service learning/community writing projects (grant proposals, pamphlets, letters to the editor, etc.). Still, I feel (at least I hope) that I left my students with more confidence to discuss and write about current events within (and beyond) the classroom setting and to gain a better sense of their roles within academic, work and neighborhood communities.

The class was conducted according to 1157 standards as stated in the Freshmen English Program Handbook. Throughout the semester, students were asked to write six essays, and were required to revise all but the last two. Two of these essays were in-class, but students were given opportunities in class to discuss and prepare outlines. All essays (except the ad analysis) required that students locate a variety of resources; they used their own experience, secondary sources (editorials, articles, essays, etc.), and more importantly, pulled from those social spaces and geographies (i.e., their neighbors, coworkers, friends, family, a resident riding next to them on the bus) that make up so much more than their academic selves. Some assignments, like the first essay of the semester, were tied to a larger audience and a larger goal beyond freshmen

composition, which I consider to be crucial to engaging students in reading and writing that, as the 1158 text suggests, truly “matters.” The first essay of the semester asked students to become familiar with (and get involved in) the Katrina Narrative Project³. They were given an overview of the project and the roles of the creative writing and social sciences departments on campus and were then asked to find a co-worker, neighbor, friend, family member, total stranger, and have them share their own Katrina stories. (For the purpose of class discussion, interviewees names were left confidential.) Students shared these interviews in small groups and after discussing the similarities and differences in each evacuation, shelter, return home, and communication story, were asked to write their own narrative. Students were then give the option to contribute their narratives to the Katrina Narrative Project, and after several revisions throughout the semester, all but two of my students did so.

This assignment is not very different from the narrative essays that 1157 instructors often use in the beginning of the semester. What made this assignment decidedly local, however, is that it asked students to write about a locally historical event and it was part of a project that was developed for the benefit of our community; the first-hand narratives collected will become part of an historical archive that will be housed in the UNO library to be accessed by future scholars, researchers, and anyone interested in learning about those who survived the storm. Also, in many ways, the narratives became the groundwork for a more localized pedagogy throughout the semester; most of our class discussions, readings, and subsequent writing prompts were spurred by students’ narrations and their interviews of others’ experiences. Through the sharing and

³ Though the KNP may not be accepting submissions in semesters to come, there are multiple opportunities for students to contribute their writing. Many other archives city-wide are collecting written work by victims of Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. One example is *The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, a regional database sponsored UNO’s History department and George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media. The database collects not only narratives, but photos, sound bites, and other materials. This is one of many useful sites where UNO instructors might direct their students.

discussion of narratives, students stumbled upon the commonalities and differences of their Katrina experiences, and were able to hone in on central topics of local debate—the city’s shelter of last resort policies, the evacuation rights of animals, the national media’s portrayal of New Orleans, the unification of levee boards, the push for more permanent housing solutions—topics that eventually became the subjects of argument and research papers during the semester. For example, one student who waited in traffic for hours on end and who ended up spending a night 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 effectiveness of other 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. In a particularly insightful essay, one student drew inspiration from his initial KNP interview with a correctional officer at Templeman II (a New Orleans Parish jail) and, in his search for online news articles and government documents, eventually argued for the evacuation rights of prison inmates; one of his online sources, *The Human Rights News*, stated that prisoners at Templeman III had been abandoned by correctional officers and left in holding cells in chest deep water, finally being evacuated September 1st, four days after the hurricane. 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.

Because this first assignment, in connection with the Katrina Narrative Project, weighed so heavily in how the rest of the course unfolded, I would like to present some of my students' writing done when they were first introduced to the Katrina Narrative Project. Freewriting became a routine classroom activity, as did regular postings of their edited, well-developed versions on our course Blackboard pages. I would like to present students revised responses (all that became part of their own narratives) to one of the first few sessions of freewriting activities of this semester, which asked questions to prepare students for the writing of their own narratives. I like to call these freewriting opportunities, "Where Y'at" sessions, as I asked students to discuss what their feelings were on certain topics, or in the case of the narrative assignment, to describe the places they evacuated to, their first time home after the storm, their experiences being away from home, their opinion of the media coverage, how they managed to communicate with family and friends during and immediately after the storm, how they spent their time after the storm, what plans they had for their future at UNO or in New Orleans, and any other thoughts that came to mind. 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. My husband and brother had removed all the sheet rock inside. The whole neighborhood had about eight feet of water. Since most of the houses were higher than the street ours only had five feet. That was more than enough to destroy almost everything. All the furniture in the house was broken and fallen down. My clothes hanging in the closet had soaked up the water and got so heavy the whole rack fell down. The only things I could save were my old clothes on top of the closet. The bird cage I left on the dining table was now on

the floor with only a feather inside, and the little turtle that belonged to my son was in a corner all dried up.

Writing from limbo:

We have been making good progress on our home and life the way it was until lately. There is word of the Federal Government buying out our neighborhood. They plan on making a green space, or an interstate running from Poland Avenue to Parish Road to help the port industry transfer material. Our lives are once again put on hold. We would love nothing better than to return to St. Bernard one day. Our whole family does. But, now we have come to learn that we might never return to our home.

Rebuilding family business and restoring their homes:

When we got back to Alabama we unloaded everything off of the truck we had borrowed and got to work cleaning and tearing apart lawn mower engines. It took the three days to fix all the engines and clean all of the furniture, but in the end we got all of the mowers to run again which was a relief for my father who makes his living as a professional landscaper. A couple weeks later we returned to Mississippi and started working on our own damp house; gutting and re-sheet rocking took a couple of days. We had to get an SBA loan, like so many others because we had no flood insurance. It took a month and a half to finish the house, but afterwards it turned out better than before.

Being split up from families:

My mother, stepfather, and three year old sister are moving to Atlanta, GA because my stepfather's job in New Orleans was in jeopardy. For the longest

time I overlooked the subject of them leaving our hometown and moving to another state somewhere miles away. I didn't realize how very real it was until they were packed up, standing on our street, ready to head out. It seems as if I will never see my house or family again. 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.

Still searching for loved ones:

My mother is in the missing persons' database for Katrina. No one has heard from her since August 22, 2005, when she called my dad from an airport in Virginia and told him that she would be coming back to New Orleans after having been on vacation. My grandmother and I are constantly looking on the internet, making fliers, and talking to FEMA representatives in an effort to find her.

Or suffering with survivor guilt:

The majority of houses are abandoned, thus when I walked down Oden Street of the Gentilly area, it felt as though I were completely alone in an area which everyone had been evacuated out of because of disease. There is a clamor of feelings that arise for me as I view this unfortunate area. I feel desperate sadness for the trauma of the area, how it affects the home and business owners, and the entire city of New Orleans. Although I am grateful that I was so fortunate to not have experienced such utter devastation after Katrina, I also feel guilty at my luck while I know other people are suffering.

And one student couldn't have described the push and pull of post-Katrina life any better:

I left my old job to return to UNO, and now I need to find a new job. I am still fighting FEMA over the loss of my car and I am getting closer. So here I am without Internet, or cable, trying to pick up the pieces of my life. I know this semester will be hard, but I am willing to work for it. Only the good things in life are worth fighting for, and I figure an education is one of those things.

In asking my students, "Where Y'at?" I am asking them to put into writing what Mauk might term as the geographies of their lives. By engaging these geographies in the classroom and involving students in a larger university-wide/community minded-project, my students are better able to "locate" themselves both academically—as a student at UNO—and as a citizen of New Orleans or another community. And, imbedded in these personal narratives are opportunities for further readings, discussion, and writing that will continue to "locate" students in conversations occurring in New Orleans, their home parishes, workplaces, city streets, coffee shops, and at the dinner table. Only when students recognize their participation in local discourse communities may they begin to think about how they are active participants in the rebuilding of New Orleans, whether they want to be or not. As instructors, knowing where our students are writing from can help us in our role as educators to better serve our students' writing needs; further, knowing where, geographically, our students are writing from is the first step towards more meaningful pedagogies that draw from local environs and the local spaces our students inhabit, which can lead to more momentous writing activities beyond the classroom.

Not all students, of course, felt themselves so dramatically affected by the storm. Some expressed feelings of isolation during the months directly after the storm, but after returning to New Orleans, to their homes that were virtually untouched, they have returned to "normal" life.

Some students resisted the writing assignments and prompts I assigned and did not see any connection between their current lives and a post-Katrina New Orleans, despite the fact that they many of them commute daily through scenes of devastation, and have no plans to leave New Orleans and the surrounding areas after they graduate. There are students and faculty alike who are resistant to twenty-four hour Katrina coverage: “needing a break” from Katrina is a sentiment both students and faculty have shared; “it’s depressing” is another. Spending a whole semester reading and writing in response to current, local issues of importance such as, levee repairs, mayoral races, rebuilding neighborhoods, etc. may seem exhaustive, but ignoring current events in New Orleans in a post-Katrina writing classroom is akin to asking our students 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 are marked for mold remediation; like asking them to buy earplugs so as not to hear the pounding levee repairs occurring right off campus. Asking our students to write about these places can be especially therapeutic, and is a way to help students out of the paralysis that attends depression. As Chris Rose suggests, one cannot live in New Orleans and not be emotionally affected by the destruction. And though the effect of traveling and moving day to day through flooded and abandoned neighborhoods has the potential to leave one desensitized, the city of New Orleans needs students to wake up to their roles as citizens; it is our job as educators to prepare our students for this new role—that of active participants in campus and community.

Revamping our Classrooms in Response to Katrina

Getting our students to this point, getting them to view themselves in such a role, is also challenging considering the difficulties our students have with the mechanics of writing and the

perceptions they have in regards to freshmen composition. Locating “meaning” in the types of writing that is done in English 1157 and 1158 is something many of our students have a difficult time doing, resulting in a question I hear from at least one student at the end of every semester, “Is there a way I can test out of 1158?” The fact remains that though we in the English department certainly understand the importance of strong communication and writing skills, many of our students find freshmen composition a waste of time. Freshmen composition is a course to “get through,” a two-semester sequence ending in a proficiency exam, a general education requirement keeping them from their diplomas. An equally upsetting perception that students have is that after freshmen composition they will never have to write again. Writing, in other words, isn’t real. Because many students are not asked to write outside of 1157 or 1158, (mostly taken during their freshmen year) and because students are not often asked to perform writing activities that take place within the community, or even to write about local issues on a more regular basis, writing is wholly unconnected to the real world, to real audiences, and to real purposes.

However, we cannot blame students for these often negative perceptions of freshmen composition. Engaging our students in readings and leading them in debates over “Body Politics,” “Big Brother,” and “Learning Matters” (from the required 1157 text, *Reading Life*) has sufficed in the past to generate plenty of student discussion and writing material for composition courses and proficiency exams; however, it is now imperative that we “shift our focus”, as Ellen Cushman so vividly articulates, “away from our own navels, Madonna, and cereal boxes to the ways in which we [and our students] can begin to locate ourselves within the democratic process of everyday teaching and learning in our neighborhoods” (12). Our curriculum as it stands is detached from student experience. What we need at UNO is a curriculum that takes into account

the significance of place (Owens), the “multiple geographies” of our students (Mauk), and the needs of our local communities (Cushman).

What follows are writing assignments that do just that. They have been designed by instructors at UNO and some have been implemented in the post-Katrina classroom.

- **Writing History: An Experience, An Experiment:** This assignment asks students to write about their own post-Katrina experiences, posing the question, “..who will write this history if not us?” After reading “E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake” and Alice Walker’s “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” from *Reading Life*, students are asked to reflect (in essay form) on an experience that changed them or gave them new insight into their own lives or the world around them. Final drafts of student writing were then posted on a class website. (Courtesy of Ms. Alison Arnold)
- **Envisioning a “new” New Orleans:** After reading local articles regarding the rebuilding of the city, and after writing about their own visions for a new New Orleans, students develop, as a class, a list of guiding “principles” for a new city. This list is then distributed to smaller groups of students who decide on how to present the material to a larger public, either by designing a leaflet, a website, a letter to the editor, etc.
- **The Blame Game™ or in fewer instances, The Praise Game™:** After reading the barrage of articles immediately following the storm and its aftermath, students are asked to write an argument essay placing blame (or praise) on either federal, state, or local governments. Other editions ask students to blame/praise the media for its coverage of the Hurricane. Students are asked not only to draw from current news articles and other literature, but from opinions of local New Orleanians. (Courtesy of Dr. Charles Cannon)

- Writing Hurricane Katrina: A Classroom Blog: This blog space became a classroom setting for students who began the October semester from all over the country. Students used the space to write reflections on the storm, sharing testimonials, photos, and news articles of relevance. Students were able to build an on-line academic community as well as work together to build an archive of storm-related material. Unlike Blackboard, blog spaces are open for anyone to view—allowing for a wide audience that extends beyond the UNO classroom community.

(Courtesy of Dr. Doreen Piano)

- Community Building: After engaging students in several readings regarding the rebuilding of flooded areas (from the *Times Picayune* and other on-line sources), students are asked to choose one neighborhood to visit in order to talk to the residents and write an argument for or against the rebuilding of that particular neighborhood. A variation of this assignment asks students to take photos of a neighborhood or a particular landmark damaged by Katrina and to write a detailed description comparing this space pre- and post-Katrina. (Courtesy of Dr. Anne Boyd)

- “Ray Nagin’s Chocolate City” response paper: Mayor Ray Nagin is known for speaking his mind and not necessarily caring if his words backfire on local (and since Katrina, national) television. Students first read an article by Chris Rose that was actually written before the storm, (August 27) which introduced the term “Ray Speak” to describe the Mayor’s “Naginisms” and what others later described as his way of “dismissing bad news with flippant non-sequiturs” (DuBos). Some people, of all races, were offended by his comments that New Orleans will “be chocolate at the end of the day” while others just saw it as another example of “Ray Speak” and responded lightly to what is surely an “only in New Orleans” moment. Students were asked to go online to first get an idea of the breadth of the Mayor’s statement, locating various responses to Nagin’s comments—from local newspaper writers, to CNN, to T-Shirt companies. Students

were also asked to garner the opinions of someone they spoke to during the day. In a journal response, students were asked to compare local coverage to national coverage, or media coverage to their own personal opinions to consider if Nagin's statement, among others, has done our city damage from a national perspective.⁴

I consider the above assignments localized and more suitable to UNO's student body in that they delve into topics that are current and locally significant, allowing students to experience history in "real time" by drawing from local resources and requiring students to interact with members of the campus and neighboring communities. And, though community based and personalized, these assignments still situate local issues and local concerns in a larger, national context, allowing students to see the big picture. Because these particular assignments ask students to experience the classroom through different media (i.e. the use of blogs, online courses, Blackboard) they afford students the ability to conceive spaces other than the classroom and the campus community as suitable "locations" for academics, and finally, because these assignments ask students to recognize these spaces as writing locations, their assignments have the potential to prepare students to take action as citizens of the New Orleans area. Further, not only are these particular assignments localized in nature, but they also meet the objectives of a freshmen composition course, specifically UNO's objectives for its Freshmen English Program. These assignments engage students in the "dynamic interplay of writer, text, reader, and contexts," "introduce students to the conventions of writing academic and public discourse" through the writing of "argumentative prose," teach students how to analyze texts, and finally, how to "collect and use information from outside sources" (Faculty Handbook 6-7). Lastly, these particular assignments break away from traditional current-issue driven assignments in that

⁴ See appendix for these assignments in greater detail. Alison Arnold's class website, can be found at <http://www.uno.aliarnold.com> and Doreen Piano's class blog at <http://www.writingkatrina.blogspot.com>

they actively engage students with issues of debate as they take place within their communities rather than fostering a conception that discussion and writing are activities best left to classroom environments. In some capacity, students are writing for (and with) these communities and thus, as Ervin would state, “directly interacting” with society (“Writing for Diverse Publics”), a goal that no purely current-issue curriculum could achieve.

In presenting these particular assignments, I hope to demonstrate what I believe is a grassroots movement by instructors towards more community-minded classrooms, one that is a rather natural one. All theory aside, the instinct to move in this new direction cannot be ignored, and I cannot resist thinking about what all this means for the future of the writing program. If instructors continue to engage their students in localized assignments as mentioned above, might the next move head in the direction of service learning, towards, perhaps, a model such as that offered by LSU?

Through this lens, first-year writing courses at UNO might enable students to contribute to already existing community service projects such as the Neighborhood Story Project⁵, where students at McDonogh Senior High wrote about violence and beauty in their neighborhoods by writing their own histories of particular neighborhoods that are now flooded; students and teachers may join forces with non-profits such as New Orleans Outreach, the Lake Ponchartrain Basin Foundation, or Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. with the goal of meeting these organizations’ writing needs. Or, instructors and students can head their own community projects, taking their inspiration from the Katrina Narrative Project, and perhaps collaborating with other New Orleans

⁵ The Neighborhood Story Project’s creators are New Orleans teachers Abram Himmelstein and Rachel Breunlin, who initiated the project after a 2003 shooting at their school, John McDonogh Senior High, a shooting that resulted in the death of one student and the injuring of three others. Student writers participating in the project, Himmelstein comments, “wanted to address the perception that [their] neighborhoods are only about violence and drugs...and chose to address the negative parts of their lives, but...also wanted to show that [there are] people struggling to make beauty” (AP). Five student books were published in June and 4000 more were to be sold before Katrina; these were destroyed after the storm and the project’s creators are struggling to find a printer who will print more at no cost.

universities such as Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, or Xavier, to create long-lasting relationships built on the foundations of service learning.

As students realize the power inherent in the act of writing, the ability of writing to help “respond” to the particular needs of a community, they recognize writing as a significant way to change the order of things, thus gaining a deeper understanding of their role as active citizens and the role of the university in a changing New Orleans community. New Orleans, perhaps more than ever, will rely mostly on its citizens to rebuild and create this city anew. When the overwhelmed city, state, and government officials fail to respond to the needs of citizens and neighborhoods, individuals must create their own action. My students make note of this themselves, when they see their neighbors organizing Katrina clean-up crews for their neighborhood parks and streets, when they receive help from family and friends to rebuild their own waterlogged homes, and hopefully, when their university encourages them to think of themselves as active participants in the rebuilding of their worlds.

CONCLUSION

*Professors can play a key role in encouraging involvement. Those who have the greatest impact insist that student voices can matter. They invite students to wrestle with the issues of the day, take public stands, to hold political and economic leaders accountable for their actions . . . And they often set strong examples of ways to act as engaged citizens.—Paul Rogat Loeb, *Generation at the Crossroads* (97)*

It is the nature of freshmen composition to allow for the discussion of current and local events in a way that no other English course can, thereby allowing instructors the ability to interact with students regarding experiences that affect both their daily and academic lives. For instructors who have already begun to experiment in their writing classrooms by engaging students in current, locally relevant, community-centered writing, it may be that they have experienced a renewed commitment to their campus and local communities. Instructors who in the past may have been less than zealous to take on sections of 1157 or 1158 along with their other courses, may now, post-Katrina, welcome the chance to engage in local, current debates with their students. Just as writing in a post-Katrina classroom has the potential to shape new citizen roles for our students, so does it have an affect on our instructors and how they view their own roles in a new New Orleans. Instructors, as Paul Rogat Loeb suggests, can set examples for students of what it means to be “engaged citizens” (97).

As the first year anniversary of Katrina approaches, there may be question as to how instructors can create sustainable writing activities that will civically engage students and suit post-Katrina classrooms in the semesters to come. What, for example, may instructors substitute next semester for the Katrina Narrative? Or how can instructors prepare syllabi that are structured yet flexible enough to allow for current concerns to be debated and written about? In order for a localized pedagogy to be fruitful for students, instructors, and the department as a

whole, instructors will need opportunities to share their experiences and resources. Further, while a major reconstruction of the freshmen composition program would take years, action is needed now if our goal is to meet the current needs of our communities and our students. Below are some suggestions that can be more immediately adopted:

- Create a database for writing instructors to share resources. These resources might include Katrina-related, current event, or other relevant readings to supplement the required texts (or may suggest readings from the required texts that could supplement localized assignments), as well as links to other online resources, including local and national archiving/writing/history projects that have emerged post-Katrina. This website could also allow instructors to showcase particular writing prompts, journal assignments, and other writing activities they have adapted to their classrooms, as well as a sampling of student responses, and could include a discussion board for those wishing to post comments. For instructors interested in connecting their writing classrooms to community organizations, the database could provide links to particular sites.
- Encourage collaboration among writing instructors and between disciplines. Reading groups for writing instructors (perhaps with regular presentations by faculty of the types of work being generated in the classroom) will be an invaluable resource for those implementing localized assignments into their pedagogies. These gatherings, such as the “Writing After Katrina” luncheon held at UNO in May 2006, can allow opportunities for instructors to share their successes, struggles, and strategies for teaching in a post-Katrina classroom. Meetings can be informal (set up as a round-table discussion) or can be more structured, with individual instructors showcasing their own work. Also, coordinating these gatherings with instructors from other disciplines will be important if we are to connect writing to other parts of the UNO curriculum. Increased collaboration between the English department and other disciplines can

result in co-projects, where, for example, writing classrooms join forces with history, women's studies, or statistics courses to work towards the same project—a dual course website, blog, archive, or other collective. Just as Katrina has affected the work we do in our own writing classrooms, so has the hurricane informed other disciplines across campus, and if writing is to become more meaningful for our students, it would be beneficial to explore how other departmental projects may inform the types of writing being produced in freshmen composition.

- Creating audiences or “publics” for student writing beyond the classroom is an easily organized and immediate solution to making writing more meaningful for both students and instructors. Asking students to contribute to campus and community newspapers creates audiences, as does designing writing assignments for specific archives and collectives.

Organizing campus-wide presentations of student work, where students share projects undertaken that semester or perhaps read selections from their writing, can offer students real audiences in “real-time.”

- Preserve and archive post-Katrina writing to be kept as a departmental resource. It is important to remember that during the hectic pace of the semester, we and our students are creating history, and the only way to preserve the work produced in our writing classrooms is by establishing our own department archive. In order to collect and preserve student writing and instructor pedagogy being generated in post-Katrina writing classrooms, particularly material that responds to issues of local importance to New Orleans and the Greater New Orleans community, the *Writing After Katrina Archive* has been established. Writing activities including assignments, prompts, journal responses, final papers, drafts, and in-class essays from all

composition courses and other undergraduate writing courses are currently being collected and the archives will be housed both digitally and physically in UNO Library's Special Collections.⁶

As instructors begin to “encourage involvement” (Loeb 97) they will need to be “involved” themselves, and the above resources can best prepare instructors for successful experiences in post-Katrina writing classrooms. As long as our students and faculty continue to live in FEMA trailers, move between deserted and thriving neighborhoods, gutting neighbors and family members’ homes, which promises to be the situation for many years, the University of New Orleans cannot ignore the needs of the community in which it is situated, especially when it comes to engaging students in classroom activities. When the last relief workers from other universities, the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, and church organizations leave New Orleans, our city will depend on its citizens.

⁶ For more detailed information on the *Writing After Katrina Archive* and to learn how to contribute, please see appendix.

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APPENDIX A: Localized Post-Katrina Writing Assignments

Unit One: English 1157, Spring 2006

Ms. Alison Arnold

When the levees broke and the muddy waters rushed in driving dirt and debris and forcing furniture and family photos into one nasty soup of sludge, all of us--whether we were victims of the flood or not--felt the push. Many were moved out of house and away from home, but everyone was moved inside himself, and our new residences forced us to reevaluate our lives, our notions of permanence, our sense of certainty. Through this re-evaluation, we've gained new insight into our sense of self and world, and our memories and recollections seem more valuable and more permanent than our tangible possessions. Our present feels like history in the making.

But who will write this history if not us? We all have a story to tell about a moment when we shifted, and certainly, Katrina has given new value to all previous experiences. Allowing this moment to pass without acknowledging these insights seems unfair--to New Orleans, to the world, to *us*.

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Compose an essay, modeled after E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake," in which you reflect upon an experience that changed you or gave you new insight into yourself and your place in the world. Like White, use concrete details and descriptions that allow your readers to see, feel, and understand how this experience transcends the trivial and reaches towards universal truth.

This essay should be written for a specific audience whose demographics you may define. For example, you may choose to write to New Orleanians, to non-New Orleanians, to your own peer group, to an older or younger group, to a specific ethnic group, and so on. You choose, and you write TO them. If you succeed, you shouldn't have to tell anyone to whom you've written; it should be obvious.

This essay should be based on a clear thesis--either explicit or implicit; it should include a wealth of concrete details and descriptions; it should be AT LEAST 500 words long but no longer than 1200; it should met all the criteria on the grading rubric, and it should be properly formatted.

REQUIRED READINGS

From the reader:

"Once More to the Lake" by E.B. White and "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self" by Alice Walker

From the handbook:

Chapter 10: Parallel Constructions; Chapter 34a: Dashes; Chapter 30: Colons;
Chapter 41: Unnecessary Words

*See <<http://www.uno.aliarnold.com/>> for samples of student work.

UNO English 1157 On-line
Fall 2005
Paper 3 Assignment Options
Dr. Charles Cannon

Please select one of the following five options. No matter which topic you choose, you must quote and/or paraphrase sources at least TWICE in your paper, and cite the source parenthetically according to MLA guidelines (see Prentice-Hall, Chapter 10).

1. **Blame Game—Classic Edition®** As Americans watched the horror unfolding in post-Katrina New Orleans, many asked themselves “how could such a thing happen here?” and began the frantic search for someone to blame. The Bush Administration was the first to deride the “Blame Game,” though it’s obvious that people, government agencies, ARE to blame and that it’s incumbent on a free press and on concerned citizens to play this game. Select either “Aftermath” or “Ultimate Cause” versions:
 - a. **Blame Game 1—Aftermath™** Whose fault is it (“God” is NOT a legitimate answer) that nearly a hundred thousand people seemed to be left to starve (in some cases, die) as the nation watched in horror in front of their TV screens? **Blame Game-Classic Edition®/ Aftermath™** invites players to assign graduated levels of blame to local, state, and federal government authorities. Ideal for standard five-paragraph essay format! Reserve one level of government for each body paragraph, saving the biggest share of blame for the final body paragraph. Remember to quote from the Chicago Tribune’s 9/11/05 investigative report, “Blueprint for Disaster.”
 - b. **Blame Game 2—Ultimate Cause™** Many New Orleanians are less interested in the failure of the disaster response, and more interested in the cause of the disaster in the first place. New Orleanians realize that the catastrophic flooding that inundated Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes was not a *direct* cause of the hurricane, rather a result of tragic, fatal negligence of the hurricane protection system. Officials in another low-lying area of the world, The Netherlands, quickly noted that their flood-protection systems would not have failed under similar stresses. **Blame Game-Classic Edition®/ Ultimate Cause™** invites players to blame it on the levees--and the human-beings responsible for their design, construction, and maintenance. Remember to quote from the two levee-related stories from the Times-Picayune, posted on Bb.
2. **Blame Game—Media Edition®** It was alternately hilarious and insulting for New Orleans evacuees around the country to watch national media coverage of our peculiar, misunderstood society during the crisis period of Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath. From geography (west-side, north-side, where are they talking about??) to culture, mainstream media reporters, drunk on hyperbole, completely missed the mark in story after story. Sometimes their mischaracterizations weren’t so humorous. The Chicago Tribune reported “The once-majestic canopy of live oaks along St. Charles Avenue now lies broken and splintered on the ground.” This report caused me serious anguish, yet, when I returned to New Orleans, I was overjoyed to see the report was totally false. More

recently, responsible news sources have admitted that the widely reported lawlessness that supposedly overran the city was hugely exaggerated. This kind of misreporting may have actually caused irreparable damage to our recovery efforts, as locals and tourists alike decide, based on erroneous reporting, never to return. **Blame Game—Media Edition®** invites players to blame the media. You must be sure to paraphrase and quote from actual, acknowledged reports that have since proved to be false. Try searching newspaper, magazine, or website archives, dates 8/30/05-9/5/05.

3. **Blame Game—Big Picture®** Did Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath expose problems, not just for South Louisiana, but for the United States as a whole? Many people think so. The vast tragedy, televised world-wide for all to see, led to a round of soul-searching for thoughtful Americans. Many have come to the conclusion that Katrina made it impossible to ignore any longer major problems that have been festering in American society—and government—for at least thirty years. Many Americans wondered, for example, why so much more American tax money goes to Baghdad than to an American city. The issue of federal government spending priorities continues to anger many people as they see a federal government that, in its current form, can't seem to promise an American community the 5-7 billion dollars of infrastructure (levees) on which its future depends (for perspective, the fed. gov't. spends about 6.8 billion dollars a day; Iraq War has already cost well over a hundred-billion). . **Blame Game—Big Picture®** invites players to blame the whole dominant political culture of the United States over the past thirty years. For advanced players only! Be sure to quote from Adolph Reed, Jr.

4. **New! Praise Game®** For players too squeamish to be “negative” by assigning blame, there's always blame's opposite, praise. The **Praise Game®** invites players to identify three institutions, groups, or persons who behaved admirably during the hurricane, its aftermath, or anytime since then, as the community struggles to recover. Possible candidates (from my perspective) are the United States Coast Guard, the United Broadcasters of New Orleans, nola.com, the pump operators of the Orleans Parish Sewerage and Water Board, the Brennan family (of restaurateurs—particularly Ralph Brennan), residents of unflooded neighborhoods who refused to leave when ordered to do so, or the University of New Orleans. Players are responsible for locating their own sources for the required references.

English 1157, Spring 2006
Celeste Del Russo
Essay 1: Katrina Narrative

Our first two assignments this semester are inspired by the Katrina Narrative Project, a writing project created by the University of New Orleans that seeks to collect the first-hand testimonies of individuals living in and around the New Orleans area who were affected by the hurricane. While your first journal assignment required that you interview a neighbor, family member, friend, or stranger and write about his or her storm experiences, for essay number 1, I'd like you to complete your own Katrina narrative.

Whether you are a permanent resident of this area or not, whether you evacuated or stayed, you still have a story to tell, and your story is meaningful. For those of you who are interested, you may contribute final drafts of your personal narratives to the Katrina Narrative Project, which will be housed in the University library.

Length: 3+ pages

Because most of us could probably write an entire book about our experiences, here are some possible areas to focus on in the narratives: Evacuation stories:

- Talk about when you left
- The decision making process
- Talk about where you went
- Staying in your home
- On the road stories

Evacuating with others:

- Friends
- Families
- Pets (taking with and leaving behind)
- Alone

Staying out of place stories

- Talk about your experience
- Shelter stories
- Staying with friends and families
- Out of state stories
- Superdome stories
- Convention center stories
- I-10 stories
- Overpass stories

Communication stories

- Trying to find others
- How did you do that?
- Where did you get your information in the weeks after the storm?

Returning home stories

Making the decision to return

Not returning

Talk about what you saw..

Talk about what you did

Talk about what you have lost

To explore in your narratives, only if you feel comfortable

What has been interrupted in your life?

What do you think about your life now?

What new ideas about your life have
you thought about?

What now triggers sadness? Anger?

Joy? Fear?

Post-Katrina Paper Topics (Argument)
Spring 2006
Dr. Anne Boyd

Paper #3 (Out of Class): Write a 3-4 page paper in which you argue for or against the reconstruction and repopulation of a particular flooded neighborhood. You have two options: 1) address your paper to the residents of the neighborhood and help them decide what they should do with their homes (gut and repair, raise to FEMA flood level or above, or sell or accept government buyout and relocate); 2) address your paper to the mayor and his Bring New Orleans Back Commission and make a case for or against allowing people to rebuild in the neighborhood (if not, address what should happen to the land, and if yes, discuss what modifications, if any should be made to the buildings in the neighborhood).

Readings:

- Kari Lyderson, "Fight Continues over New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward." *The New Standard*. 21 Feb. 2006.
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- Jarvis DeBerry, "Piles of Debris Aren't Houses Anymore." *Times-Picayune* 10 Jan. 2006
- Jarvis DeBerry, "Built by Racism, Areas Became Home." *Times-Picayune* 31 Jan. 2006.

PAPER 4 (In-Class) Topic: Community

Prompts:

1. According to Jason Henderson, in his op-ed titled "Your Parking Lots or Your Lives," "the overall debate about how much of [New Orleans] to rebuild is degenerating into a debate between reducing the footprint and population and simply rebuilding everything." Some, like Henderson, are promoting a smaller, more walkable city. Others, like those who wrote letters to the paper in response to Henderson's op-ed, want to retain their suburban lifestyles in Lakeview, Gentilly, and New Orleans East. What do you think should be done as we rebuild the city? Should the size of the city be reduced? Why or why not?

2. The concept of "New Urbanism"-which has dominated discussions of how to rebuild New Orleans, St. Bernard, and the Gulf Coast- promotes neighborhoods that are denser, pedestrian-friendly, and diverse. Many believe that the best way to create more livable communities is to design them based on these principles. But others reject the notion that "community" can be designed and planned. Do you believe that what Scott Russell Sanders calls "common life" (i.e., a close-knit community that is connected to the environment) can be created by New Urbanist architects and developers? Write an essay in which you take a position on this issue.

Readings:

- Austin Williams, "New Orleans and the New Urban Vision." *Spiked-essays* 9 Feb. 2006.

- Robert Tanner, “On Hurricane-Wrecked Gulf Coast, Dream of New Kind of American City.” Associated Press. 21 Jan. 2006
- Jason Henderson. “Your Parking Lots or Your Lives” Times-Picayune 5 Feb. 2006
- Letters to the Editor, Times Picayune 7, 13, 25 Feb. 2006
- “A Sense of Place” and “AIA’s 10 Principles for Livable Communities.” American Institute of Architects Website
- Scott Russell Sanders, “The Common Life” (in *Reading Matters*, a UNO reader)
- Michael Pollan, “Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns” (in *Reading Matters*)

Writing Hurricane Katrina: A Class Blog
English 2151, Fall 2005
Dr. Doreen Piano

Introduction from *Writing Hurricane Katrina: A Class Blog* at
<<http://www.writingkatrina.blogspot.com/>>

This class blog was created by students enrolled in English 2151: Writing the Hurricane: Natural Disaster and the North American Psyche at the University of New Orleans in Fall 2005. As part of an attempt to “witness” Katrina’s aftermath, I have set up this class blog to act as both a collective research hub for students to utilize for their writing and as a space to create their own archives as a public memorial for all those affected by the hurricane and its aftermath.

APPENDIX B: Writing After Katrina Archive Fact Sheet

Writing After Katrina: An Archival and Teaching Resource Project

What is the *Writing After Katrina* Archive?

The archive has been created to collect and preserve student writing and instructor pedagogy being generated in post-Katrina writing classrooms. Writing activities including assignments, prompts, journal responses, final papers, drafts, and in class essays from all composition courses and other undergraduate writing courses are also welcome. We intend to house the archives both digitally and physically in UNO Library's Special Collections.

This archive will be of great interest both locally and nationally for scholars in English Studies, especially those in rhetoric and composition, but also those who have an interest in pedagogy, history, and the social sciences and who rely on primary materials for their research. By submitting any materials done in your writing classes (both past courses and in-progress) that respond to issues of local importance to New Orleans and surrounding areas affected by Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, you and your students will be contributing to a very special moment in UNO's history.

In addition to the maintenance of an archive, the material we collect will become part of a departmental database for students and faculty who wish to share some of the collected electronic resources. We hope to eventually have this as a link on the dept. website.

How can my students and I contribute?

Instructors may send course syllabi, writing prompts and other activities for generating writing, rationales for Katrina-related syllabi, success stories, personal reflections on teaching in a post-Katrina writing classroom, and other related resources.

Student work is also being collected. Instructors may submit work on behalf of their students, **but only with signed permission from students**. Student Consent forms are currently being updated and will be available at a later date. Students may also submit their own work directly to the archive. Look for a flyer in your mailbox announcing this opportunity for students as well as other exciting developments.

Where do I send all materials?

Electronic copies may be sent to Celeste Del Russo at her email below. All hard copies may be left with Doreen Piano in LA113.

If you are interested in contributing to the collection or have any other questions, please contact Doreen (dpiano@uno.edu) or Celeste at (cdekruss@uno.edu)

If you are interested in being part of the Writing After Katrina collective, a consortium of interested writing instructors who want to exchange ideas, collaborate on research and writing projects, and attend occasional meetings to discuss teaching ideas and resources, please contact Doreen Piano.

APPENDIX C: Human Subjects Approval Form

***University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research***
University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Dr. Doreen Piano
Celeste Del Russo
LA 111

November 20, 2006

RE: A pedagogy of location: (Re)building cultural, community, and academic identity:
Freshman composition after Katrina

IRB# 04apr06

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the
University of New Orleans and federal guidelines.

Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any
changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB
prior to implementation.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you
are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!
Sincerely,

Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

VITA

Celeste Del Russo was born in Portland, Connecticut and received her A.B. in Writing and Literature with a minor in Secondary Education from Wheaton College, Massachusetts. She taught secondary-level English in Boston, Attleboro, and Lakeville public schools before moving to New Orleans in August 2003. She, her husband, and three dogs Bayou, Gumbo, and Gemma remained in the city for Hurricane Katrina until they were able to safely evacuate three days later. She has written about her evacuation experiences in the *Wheaton Quarterly* and has contributed the personal testimonies of her Irish Channel neighbors to the *Katrina Narrative Project*.