

## Disaster Pedagogy/Building Communities: From Wikis and Websites to Hammers and Nails

Holly Baumgartner and Jennifer Discher, Mercy College of  
Northwest Ohio

- ✧ Mercy College professors in Toledo, Ohio responded to
- ✧ Hurricane Katrina through a disaster pedagogy. Students in
- ✧ composition classes created research wikis and participated in
- ✧ email dialogues and exchanges with University of New Orleans
- ✧ students. A new course, *Service in Action: The Sociological*
- ✧ *Impact of Hurricane Katrina*, was also created involving an
- ✧ alternative, volunteer-based spring break trip. This reflection
- ✧ explores how communal engagement is shaped, augmented,
- ✧ and challenged by the use of emergent technologies, and
- ✧ how, through the lens of service-learning, students may find
- ✧ their own voices, coming to recognize that they have the
- ✧ power and where-with-all to effect change.

In Toledo, Ohio, close to the border with Canada, we watched the devastating landfall of Hurricane Katrina. On the surface, it seemed as if we were well removed from the catastrophe, but such an attitude did not hold water when we really considered what it means to be a citizen of the United States. The key word here is *United*. What affects our Southern neighbors will ultimately affect us as well – economically, socially, politically, emotionally. Hurricane Katrina, for us, as for many educators outside of Louisiana and Mississippi, presented a powerful teaching and learning moment. Not only did the hurricane play a central role in our composition classroom for several semesters, but it prompted the creation of a new course, *Service in*

Action: The Sociological Impact of Hurricane Katrina, entailing a service-learning trip to help with hurricane disaster relief efforts, a trip that is being repeated in Spring 2008.

The first part of our dual efforts of classroom teaching and service-learning centered on composition. In the classroom, our response to the continuing crisis involved a hybrid literacy, as described by Thomas Deans, where students write about/for/with the community, using computer-mediated collaboration. As W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey T. Grabill explain in a recent article in *CCC*, "the issues that most communities face as they imagine who they are and what they might be require what rhetoricians have always understood to be acts of invention," that is, "rhetoric is how we come to know who we are" (423). We wanted to stretch our definition of community outside of the classroom and to engage in dialogue with survivors in Post-Katrina New Orleans. Our students wanted to know what role they might play in a trauma that seemed on the surface to be remote and disconnected from their daily lives. However, through the immediacy of a joint project with students at the University of New Orleans (UNOLA), we co-created a "contribution-based pedagogy" (Hamer 68) in which the dynamic context fosters meaning, empathy, and, conceivably, agency.

For our composition project, we set up an exchange between Mercy College students in Toledo, Ohio and UNOLA students. Many of the UNOLA students were still homeless, some living in FEMA trailers or sharing apartments with numerous others. For the first part of the project, the UNOLA students created a blog of their own Katrina trauma narratives to which our students were given access in order to generate responses and craft commentaries. These interactions nurtured examination of our students own cultural frames of reference. The following semester, we, along with our UNOLA colleague, had our students conduct email interviews with each other, exploring outsider/insider perspectives and other cultural issues. These exchanges prompted our students to produce a research Wiki. This

Wiki incorporated their reflections on their email dialogues and wove a tapestry of both qualitative and quantitative research. The Wiki and blog became *ekphrastic* spaces, opening up what Robert Miltner calls “collaboration as conversation” (par.1 ff). In this conversation, our students flowed between responder and respondent, producer and consumer. Renee Fountain asserts, “Wiki pedagogy is literally – and figuratively – ‘in-the-making’. Wikis, both in and by their ontological existence, circumvent traditional power/knowledge relations” (10). Though the Wiki demanded intense individual effort, even more importantly, it refocused engagement on the community level, often in challenging ways, subverting the “social norms and practices” we assumed in our courses as well.

This cross-institutional collaboration bears out, in essence, what Bill Anderson suggests: that “the context in which students engage in interaction impacts the nature and extent of that interaction.” Whether in spite of or because of the virtual context, our students validated the UNOLA students’ narratives in desperately needed ways just as their trauma and survival stories demanded of our students critical awareness of the lives of others. Their dual positioning thereby opened a window onto the ethical through their “response-ability” and reflection on it. The contact also made literally visible to our students Brock et. al’s conclusion that “There is no ‘transparent’ lens through which we render ‘pure’ interpretations of others and their lived experiences” (58). On a practical level, other than word-processing, none of our students had computer experience, so the pitfalls of online collaboration and its accompanying technologies was a lesson on its own (for all of us). Our students came to recognize, as Alison E. Regan and John D. Zuern discuss, the “asymmetrical distribution of technology resources” and the necessity for ethical interrogation of these disparities. Finally, our cross-institutional collaboration using in-the-making technologies helped to cultivate some of the most important skills our students need

to be involved, rhetorically capable members of our local, national, global, and college communities.

At the same time that the composition courses were working online with UNOLA students, many of our students were expressing the desire for even more direct methods of contact. The impetus to connect with hurricane survivors through service was ripe within our Mercy College community. Faculty, staff and students raised generous monetary and material support, yet the desire remained to offer help face to face. Clearly, the experience of the Gulf Coast residents touched the hearts of the Mercy College community in Toledo, Ohio. We linked this heart connection to academics as a way to help make sense out of the issues that surfaced in our engagement with Katrina and our disaster pedagogy, thus prompting a radical change in direction of our spring break service-learning trip.

Our first step was to contact the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Diocese of Biloxi, who provided us with the connections we needed for our Service in Action: The Sociological Impact of Hurricane Katrina course. The 8-week course included an "Alternative Spring Break" experience consisting of a week long trip to the Gulf Coast to work with social service, social justice, and faith based organizations that served hurricane survivors. The Northwest Ohio community enthusiastically backed the trip, with funding coming from all over the state: Mansfield Hardware, Dayton's Sisters of the Precious Blood, and region-wide Lathrop Construction Company. Students also kicked in \$200 each. Staff, faculty, administrators, and students drove 18 hours south in crowded vans. One student, describing her arrival, wrote:

The city was starving for a sense of relief as we circled what used to be the streets of many homes and well-known businesses. The people held an overwhelmed expression on their faces as they went through the rubble of their personal belongings. Most of us did not expect to see that much

devastation six months after the storm originally hit. Our eyes were truly opened to the reality of this natural disaster along with the compassion and desire to help that filled our hearts.

After the exhausting drive and the emotional impact of arrival, students wanted to jump in more than ever. During that week, our volunteer service included removing downed trees and brush, cleaning a warehouse for storage of donated items, ripping out new drywall so poorly hung in one home that it needed replacement again, delivering shingles and removing debris from roofing jobs, and gutting houses so that repairs could finally begin. Still, in the end it became questionable who the beneficiaries were: the people in the communities we served or ourselves. As one student put it, "in giving, you will always receive. I went to the Gulf Coast to give. Yet this experience gave me more than I could ever have imagined."

But service-learning is not simply doing a service based project; it is a pedagogical approach to the delivery of content. It is used in conjunction with other modes of teaching such as lecture, discussion and traditional writing assignments. Therefore, volunteering to help hurricane survivors would not be enough to truly qualify as service-learning. Because Mercy College of Northwest Ohio is a Catholic college whose mission and vision include a call to be for others, our service-learning approach needed to be rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition of social concern, but at the same time needed to emphasize the academic underpinnings of this Alternative Spring Break trip.

We therefore looked to the guidelines offered in the *Service-Learning Course Design Workbook* from the *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning* and collaborated with several departments, including English and Allied Health, to enhance academic learning through solid course objectives, reflection, analysis, and assessment. Using a WAC foundation, the course incorporated the disciplines of Sociology and Religion/Spirituality, using service-learning as a major pedagogical

method. The learning objectives we wanted students to achieve by the end of the course included relating college core values to the study of social issues; recognizing the responsibilities of citizenship afforded, even demanded, by higher education; exploring vocation as it relates to profession, civic responsibility, and service; and developing personal and professional goals for service. We then evaluated the course and its accompanying service efforts using a variety of assessment methods, including theological reflection, journaling, presentation to the whole college, and short essay writing. Surprisingly, the learning outcomes actually exceeded the learning objectives of the course. Our students certainly emerged from this experience with a strong sense of civic duty. One student wrote:

Early September of 2005 my heart ached and bled for the people on the rooftops, the people in the rivers that used to be streets and for people who lost their love ones. My heart bled more profusely when more people suffered and died after OUR country let them die. What can I do? How can I possibly help? I am a single mother struggling through college. Yet, those were MY people suffering in the south. I had no money. I could not abandon my daughter to just leave and go to help. I felt powerless. I went from not knowing how to give what I feel that I am obligated to give to being put right smack in the middle of [the Gulf Coast]. Having this opportunity was a blessing in every way.

This new civic-mindedness offered a framework for our students to look more closely at the structures in place, or, as was often the case, were not in place. Haskvitz supports this point by saying that through service-learning, "students not only complete the community service but also study the organization that they work for or the problem that they seek to solve" (163). As one student wryly commented, "We may argue who is at fault for the hurricane aftermath. We may put blame on individuals or politicians who rightly deserve some blame. Yet the

people that we helped and the people who we met and talked to . . . know that their blessing and survival does not come from FEMA or President Bush. Their survival and blessings comes from community.” Almost every volunteer we encountered was from a charitable organization or group. We didn’t see any of the government-supported aid we expected to find. People were still living in tents; FEMA trailers were in short supply as were the basic necessities of life, such as grocery stores. Students witnessed first-hand the practical and political breakdown of infrastructures across racial and economic boundaries.

At the end of the day, the most important lesson, as clichéd as it might sound, was all about change. In *Change Forces*, Michael Fullan reinforces our experience of the change process as complex, adding that “you can’t mandate what matters” (22). We might have started with some vague idea of what we would encounter, but the results really couldn’t be predicted, especially when most of the professors were facing the disaster for the first time at the same moment as the students. We might have certain expectations or intentions, but we were also continually surprised at what might affect any one person. For example, during our week, our students, quite on their own, noticed how overworked the kitchen staff was from feeding all of the volunteer groups. They volunteered to get up at 5 a.m. and cook breakfast to give the staff at least one morning’s rest. As hard as our students were working physically, we would not have asked that of them. Their actions changed the entire atmosphere.

Working so closely together in response to disaster helped students to define themselves as a collective. In the student and faculty writings, we noted that people mostly relied on terms expressing their shared identity, such as “we,” “us,” and “our group.” For example, one student wrote, “Our group didn’t feel called to help rebuild the whole city in one week (because this process of rebuilding will take years), but to give those victims down south some relief from their burden. Only so much devastation can be cleaned up within a week’s time, but helping

another carry their burden is the least we could do for the people we met." Another person wrote:

I do not think there was a one of us who did not see death, or have someone talk to us about death that week. Everywhere we turned you could see evidence of dying: Dead trees, businesses gone, homes lost, lives shattered. The symbol on the side of homes identifying if anyone had died in that particular home. The stories we heard from victims who had lost a loved one.

These reflections also revealed student (and faculty) learning as transformative. In our course assessment, we recognized the success of our approach as being in part attributable to what Robert Selman calls the developmental readiness of the students. Their openness to and engagement with the learning process culminated in "mutual sharing" and the formation of "complex relationships with others" (qtd. in Woehrle 40). Another student wrote:

A woman who had been emotionally hurt by the loss of her son approached me with her story. I was able to listen to her with compassion as she explained her situation. She was comfortable telling me about her own encounter with the storm and how it affected her entire family. Even though we had never met each other before we seemed to be connected by the comfort that I gave her in return for the burden she shared with me. After having left the place that we met, I began to feel the pain and suffering that she had within her, run through my entire body. It was an experience that I will never be able to forget. She had touched a part of my spirit that I had yet to connect with. It was the experience of the Gulf Coast that changed the nature and condition of my own heart.

In conclusion, communal engagement experienced through the lens of service-learning also prompted Mercy College students to find their



own voices, to discover that they matter in this world, and to recognize that they have the power and wherewithal to effect change. They now know that justice includes helping to remove obstacles hindering others from finding their own voices so that collectively they are about liberation not only for themselves, but for all those who find themselves living in a state of oppression.

When the members of the trip returned home, they discovered that the computer, the tool that assisted in community building at a fundamental level in the classroom, continued to sustain this burgeoning community and connection to their experience. Although from different perspectives, students returning from the trip and students who remained in Toledo recognized that events significant in American culture(s) are shaped, augmented, and challenged by the use of emergent technologies, such as Wikis; furthermore, we learned that the *layering* of various computer technologies is an important contribution to the composition curriculum. The “horizontal knowledge assemblage” (Fountain 10) of Wikis and blogs, coupled with direct experiences and structured reflection, also figure in the preparation of student-citizens who, in the words of Charles Bazerman, “can responsibly represent, reflect on, and act in the worlds they inhabit and rebuild.” It is our hope that they carry these learnings into the leadership and partnership roles they will take on within their schools, neighborhood communities, nation, and world.

Two years after the violence of Hurricane Katrina and the immediate outpouring of public support, New Orleans and other Gulf cities are still struggling in the face of waning public attention to their ongoing efforts at revival. However, because our college truly entered into dialogue, on the screen and face-to-face, those hurricane-ravaged cities are never far from our minds and hearts. We even have a student from New Orleans still attending our college. For the Mercy College 2008 Alternative Spring Break trip, we are heading back down to the Gulf Coast. Our wish list is for those we hope to help. We connected with

the Archdiocese of New Orleans' program Operation Helping Hands which specifically targets those affected by Katrina who don't have insurance. We will be living on a volunteer floor at a homeless shelter and concentrating our energies in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. We plan on doing everything from yard work to painting. We plan on being agents of change, actively helping to reclaim life for the city of New Orleans, because, as one faculty member put it, "we know the story does not, and will not, end with death. I believe that the survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have not allowed death to be the final word."

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