

When Students Care: The Katrina Awakening

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- This paper examines how first year students at a South Texas
- Gulf Coast university became engaged as researchers and
- writers in investigating the multi-dimensional issues that
- impact hurricane victims and their communities. Working
- with a number of faculty from their learning community
- and beyond who helped them see the cross-disciplinary
- implications of Hurricane Katrina and Rita, many of
- these students succeeded not only in creating a scholarly
- conversation on this topic in class, but demonstrated a
- compassion for others in their research. Through their
- research projects, many of them developed a research
- obsession that was manifested when they learned to care.

"It would be horrible if we could dream about a different world as a project but not commit ourselves to fight for its construction."

—Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina*

I often include the above quote as an epigraph on my syllabi every semester, but this past semester in my first year writing class, where students from a Texas Gulf Coast university researched and wrote about hurricanes, Freire's quote took on special significance. Last spring, I became interested in learning more about New Orleans Latino/a survivors and discovered that over 150,000 Latinos/as were of Honduran heritage. My mother and many of my relatives immigrated to the US from Honduras, and they would watch news reports as the

destruction of hurricanes continuously plagued their impoverished homeland. As a teenager in the 1970s, I remember volunteering to gather food and clothes at the Honduran embassy in Washington D.C. as yet another hurricane struck Honduras. As an adult, I knew that many Hondurans immigrated to New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. And then seven years later a hurricane struck their second homeland, New Orleans. Most of them left New Orleans for other parts of the country and some returned home voluntarily and involuntarily. This past summer as I contemplated a theme for my first year writing course, hurricanes kept cropping up. I became obsessed with my research and it began to creep into my teaching. I wondered if my students might also become obsessed. After all, we are only eight hours from New Orleans. Our beautiful university rests on a Gulf Coast island. This island and the campus incurred the wrath of Hurricane Celia in 1970. Maybe, I said to myself, students would care about this topic. In the next moment, I envisioned eyes rolling upwards once I announced the theme of the course. I could see the students' apathetic yawns as they responded to my research on Hurricane Katrina. I remembered the echoing voice of a faculty member who said that students these days are self-centered and don't give a damn about helping their communities. I heard the nagging reminders from certain composition scholars that students should be free to choose any topic they wished for their research, and I should not limit their choices.

Despite all these encroaching voices of negativity, the voice of the liberatory teacher who believed in her students' capacity to care won out: the theme of the course would be focused on hurricanes (see <http://critical.tamucc.edu/wiki/DrKirklighter/English1301ClassFall2007>).

At the end of the semester when I reviewed my students' portfolio overviews, I found that there was overwhelmingly support for the topic of hurricanes. The majority of the students chose to research either Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita. Some students from the inland parts of Texas knew very little about hurricanes before the

course. Their words were similar to what this student majoring in psychology said after doing extensive research on the collective trauma of Hurricane Katrina survivors: "Before beginning portfolio two, I really did not have much knowledge of hurricanes, nor did I care about learning more about them. Just like any long-term project, I became emotionally attached. I often now find myself watching anything on TV about Katrina, just because I know so much about it and it generally interests me." This student was from Austin, Texas, where tornadoes are the norm. Other students from the gulf regions of Corpus Christi, Galveston, and Houston were affected by hurricanes at personal and familial levels, and their research gave them an outlet to articulate deep-seated concerns about the hurricanes in their area. While they noticed the diminishing media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and Rita, these hurricanes were still with them as they recalled in class discussions the evacuation plans of Galveston and Houston, the many New Orleans survivors that attended their schools, and the family stories of hurricanes that have become a part of their survival heritage.

Fortunately, students in my class had the opportunity to learn about hurricanes from other classes since my composition class was part of a political science learning community. Most of the students took the same classes together in composition, seminar, and political science. I asked the political science professor, Dr. Carlos Huerta, to spend some time in the large lecture talking about the government's role with Hurricane Katrina and hurricanes in Texas. I worked closely with the students' seminar leader, Robin Schubauer, in connecting their hurricane topics with her class. Coincidentally, Lazlo Fulop, the director of an award winning nonfiction documentary on Hurricane Katrina entitled *Tim's Island* was a professor at our university. We showed his documentary in the composition and seminar class, and he agreed to talk to the students about his film and another film he is working on about the reconstruction of New Orleans. As a Hurricane Katrina survivor and researcher, he made it real for them, and they inundated him with thoughtful questions.



I have taught first year composition classes consistently for fifteen years, but there was something about these eighteen-year-old students that was different as they became increasingly engaged—and, yes, obsessed—with their research. At the moment, I can only explain this difference as something I see when a group of academic researchers is fully engaged in a particular scholarly conversation. A number of students selected topics on Hurricane Katrina that related to their major. The end result was that we had a community of Hurricane Katrina researchers who discovered the medical, psychological, economic, environmental, racial, educational, and governmental disasters that plagued New Orleans and beyond. I also witnessed a change in several students' political views. In Texas, we have a number of students who are pro-Bush supporters, and faculty would often complain about the conservatism of our students. I remember one pro-Bush student who quietly asked me to review some of the research he found on Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina. He asked me if I thought this research he had uncovered might be true. I encouraged him to pursue his research with multiple sources and then make his decision on what he thought was the truth. He came to me a few weeks later and said that his research led him to change his views on Bush. I had several conservative students renounce their support of Bush and side with Hurricane Katrina survivors and their criticisms of this administration. I have to wonder if this political conversion had something to do with the act of caring on the part of the students. Through their research and the research of others, they learned to care about New Orleans. I wonder if they wanted to distance themselves from those who did not evince this acceptable level of caring.

With this class still fresh in my mind, I have only begun to understand what happened during this brief semester. It is the beginning of another research obsession connected to the complexities of caring.