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Katrina in Their Own Words— Collecting, Creating, and Publishing Writing on the Storm

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* Beginning with the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the author,
* his students, fellow teachers, and Southeastern Louisiana, the
* article focuses on lessons learned about writing and teaching
* through the experience. The article tells the story of Katrina:
* In Their Own Words, an anthology of storm stories by local
* students and teachers that the author edited, and what he
* learned from this experience about the limits of academic
* writing and the value of voice. The final section focuses on a
* risky English 101 assignment on writing music that grew out
* of the storm, how this assignment led to a radio program and
* anthology, and what this assignment taught him about seizing
* the “teaching moment.”

The first thing I did when I returned to classes 10 days after the storm was to ask my Freshman English students to write about their experience. We sat in a circle as we had before the storm, and wrote together to the word “Katrina,” and then we shared. I was surprised then at how the writing sounded, but I am not surprised now. The writing was drained, lackluster, absent of detail. It sounded clichéd. Even my own. Yes, it felt good to talk about our Katrina experiences, but it surprised me how much trouble, as writers, we had telling our stories. Perhaps, I realized, we were too close to it. So we put aside writing about Katrina after that first day back and tried to turn our minds to other things, other memories. New students appeared, displaced by the storm, and old ones disappeared, and all

rules on absence, lateness, and due dates were forgotten. How could you hold a student responsible for a typed paper when her home still had no electricity? How could you mark a student absent when he had to fix his roof or meet a FEMA trailer or track down missing family members?

Though we were having trouble writing our own Katrina stories to each other, we realized that people outside our region longed to know what we were going through. Joan Anderson, a colleague and also Technical Liaison for the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, had asked her Freshman English students to write their stories to German penpals through emails. This proved so successful that she suggested that the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project use its resources to create a blog for area students and teachers to tell their Katrina stories. Our initial aims were small—to give Writing Project teachers and students a reason and an audience for writing, as well as to give them a chance to write for themselves as part of a healing process. We devised a couple of simple prompts for writing about the storm, posted them on the blog, informed as many Louisiana Writing Project teachers as we could about the blog, and waited to see what would happen. Soon, stories began pouring in—powerful, simple stories of everyday experiences and impressions. What I had been having trouble producing in the classroom seemed to occur naturally when the internet became the vehicle and the audience was expanded to other disembodied writers on the blog.

Because the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project had produced two radio shows through the National Writing Project's "Rural Voices Radio," we knew the power of bringing writers' voices to radio, and so we approached Todd Delaney, Interim General Manager of our college station KSLU, about producing a program of hurricane writing. When we first approached him, many area students had not returned to school, some of our best teachers had lost their schools, and everyone's life seemed in disarray. Todd, however, was eager to take on this new

project, so we created forms granting us permission to use writers' work on radio and in print and began production using selected writings from the blog. Todd traveled across the state recording students and teachers and also set up times for writers to record in KSLU's studio. At first, we imagined a 15- minute program, but when Teacher Consultant and LSU instructor Robert Calmes volunteered to take lyrics written by students in my classes, turn them into songs, and record them, we knew we had something bigger (see below). Calmes recorded four songs at KSLU's studio, and at that point a full, 30-minute program began to take shape. The radio program "Katrina: In Their Own Words" was broadcast on KSLU on January, 27, 2006, during a ceremony for the writers, their friends, families, supporters, and school administrators. National Writing Project listeners from across the country, informed of the broadcast, tuned in to a simultaneous "live feed" on their computers. The show was broadcast again in March and also on the first anniversary of the storm in August 2006.

Because of the wealth of material, as the first anniversary of Katrina approached, I planned to edit an anthology featuring pieces from the radio show and blog entries. My intent was to provide copies for all of the writers and perhaps to print a few extra. When the National Writing Project learned of the anthology, they offered to fund a large printing for locals and also to send anthologies to every NWP site in the country. Almost overnight, the anthology was transformed to a large project with a short deadline, and I began soliciting additional essays and photographs to expand the book. Just as the radio show had come together through the addition of song, the anthology came together through the addition of photos, particularly a haunting picture of an American flag over a pile of debris on a decimated street on the book's cover. The book was eventually distributed across the NWP, sold at the NCTE, and reviewed by Susan Larson in the New Orleans *Times Picayune*. We even held a public reading and book release celebration for its teacher-authors in 2007.

Most publications are planned and most are “professional.” Ours was neither—and I think that is the essence of its success. Our production began because one teacher (Joan Anderson) who believed in the power of writing and the power of the Internet wanted to help her students heal. Our work featured the writing of everyday people and grew organically from blog to radio program to anthology as we realized how important the writing was and as we found new resources for making our work public.

Re-reading the anthology and reflecting on my experience editing it, what is my thinking now? Was there a paper included that prior to Katrina I would not have thought good? Was my concept of quality in writing affected by the experience? Would I change anything if I could? What have I learned?

When reading papers as teachers, it is easy to be caught up in the formalities of essay writing in assessing quality. We talk about writing as papers. We typically ask, is the paper organized, does it avoid cliché in its language, does it have original detail, a clear thesis, a natural conclusion? What does one do when confronted with 50 stories of a devastating hurricane, few of which have a formal thesis, some of which seem similar, most of which seem unpolished? This experience taught me to re-evaluate myself as a reader, teacher, and writer and see that some things are worth writing, and reading, even when (or maybe I should say specifically because) they do not conform to academic rubrics. What I came to realize through the experience of editing this anthology was the importance of the writer behind the writing, how some stories must be told, and the true value of audience and voice in authentic writing situations.

When I first looked at our raw material entries on our blog I read them as a teacher and did not see much potential. They seemed fragmentary, and many repeated tales of bending trees, bad traffic, fear stories that were almost clichéd for those who lived through the storm. To

appreciate their potential, I first had to discard my formal academic approach towards reading students work. These were not papers. They were not repetitive. They were not clichéd. They were honest writings by ordinary individuals trying to describe extraordinary experiences. Their stories mattered. Their individual voices mattered. And they mattered even in their similarity, for together they told a collective, powerful story. In addition, while we often talk about writing to real audiences in our English classes, I think that's often just talk. Here I realized were pieces that real audiences might appreciate, from locals who would want to hear their own experiences re-told, to distant Americans who could only experience and understand the storm through others words. Finally, as the radio program had taught me, behind each piece of writing, behind each common experience, was a n individual voice, and each voice was worth hearing. I had to learn to imagine those voices behind the writing, and in selecting pieces for the anthology, honor the voices. Thus, the anthology is organized around groups of voices teachers, young students, college students, singers.

Would I change anything in the anthology? Certainly. What I would have given to include a piece written by one of my students about her father's experience as a Wildlife and Fisheries officer who pulled bodies out of the flood and fought FEMA authorities at the Superdome. It was a powerful piece that had been revised into a polished essay for my fall class, but by the summer the anthology came about, the student had disappeared, and I could not track her down to get permission. There is no other piece quite like it in the anthology, and I feel its absence. I wish, too, that I'd been able to collect stories by people who were not part of the academic community—particularly New Orleans people—even though such stories might have changed the focus of the book. Three of the most compelling pieces in the anthology were by teachers who did not write for the blog but who contributed essays at my request during the summer. I wish there had been a few more essays by teachers and a few more like these, reflecting almost a year after the storm. And I wish that I'd been able to write more of my own

story, but I was so overwhelmed by the storm that I was unable to write about it at the time except in a short email to friends. Still, I am pleased with the anthology and how it was able to include the voices it does.

“The Music Assignment”—Katrina and Teaching

The turning point in the Katrina project came in November 2005 at the NWP Annual Meeting when I met Chris Gragg, an NWP Teacher Consultant from Oregon. Chris had created the “Deep Roots” project, which taught high school students how to write song lyrics and then connected them with professional musicians who turned their lyrics into song. After being inspired by Chris, I threw out my syllabus for the last two weeks of school, sacrificing a “literary paper,” and proposed to my students that we write songs.

I knew that I was taking a chance. The trouble with this idea was that I did not know much about music or about writing lyrics, and that there seemed to be little justification to teach song writing in an English 101 class. However, I just had this feeling—similar to the one I’d had so far with the Katrina project—that it was right, and that everything would somehow come together. And it did, in ways I could never have predicted.

To begin, I offered them a challenge: if they would be willing to try writing lyrics about something important to them, I would send the best songs to professional musicians I knew and try to get the songs put to music. After students agreed to the idea, I asked them to look back into their journals and circle powerful words and phrases. Then they did the same in their last paper, an “opinion” paper on something they felt strongly about. The exercise of going back and looking at their work with new eyes focused just on the language, in itself, proved invaluable to them as writers. We collected these words and phrases on the chalkboard and made a collective poem of them, talking about the poem’s language and meaning, and how the poem worked. I was

teaching them literary criticism through analyzing their own creative writing.

At this point, I brought in songs by the two musicians who had volunteered to turn my students' lyrics into music, and we examined the songs' lyrics for wording, focus, rhyme, rhythm, etc. We analyzed the lyrics as well and talked about each song's "point." Then we listened to them to see how the music added to the songs. I then gave the students their writing assignments, which combined creative with expository writing:

1. Write a song: Lyrics for a song based on one of your recent essays or on one journal entry. Your lyrics are the words of a song. They should read like a poem and look like the ones we talked about in class. We will bring these typed lyrics to Response Group for revision suggestions next class.

2. Explain your song: A sketch of 300-500 words on what you are trying to convey in that song. Your sketch should explain what your lyrics mean. What are you trying to say? What do you think it should sound like if played by a musician? What should be emphasized? What matters to you in the song? Why did you write it?

3. Copy a professional song you like: Bring a photocopy or transcription of lyrics from a professional song you like. (Copy the lyrics from a song you like that really speaks to you in some way.)

4. Explain why you like that professional song: A sketch of 300-500 words on what the musician is trying to convey in that song. Your sketch should explain what this song means. What is the musician trying to say? Why do you like it? What memories does this song evoke for you? (Tell an association or story behind it.) What matters to you in the song?

5. Bring the CD with the song on it to class: We should be able to hear a few. If yours is chosen and you read your piece about it, you can get extra credit.

Over the next two weeks, students brought their own song lyrics and sketches to “response groups” for revision suggestions. Simultaneously, they were creating one set of lyrics and two expository pieces—a “critical piece” explaining their lyrics and a more narrative “sketch” telling the story behind a professional song that meant something to them. Each student brought a CD to class with a favorite song on it, the typed lyrics, and their “sketch” explaining why that song was meaningful, and then they were invited to read the lyrics to class, read their sketch on the song, and then play the song while we all wrote in our journals to the music. This created a wonderfully diverse, yet harmonious, writing community where country, rock, soul, and metal vied for our attention.

What impressed me besides their writing was how my students truly wanted to share their favorite songs, and in doing so were eager to share their writing about these songs. Even while some expressed problems in creating their own lyrics, most were able to write impressive expository pieces about what they were trying to say in their lyrics. There were two other signs of success: 1) my weakest students did their best writing (and most eager sharing) on this assignment and 2) I truly looked forward to reading their writing and hearing their songs and stories.

So where did Katrina fit in this picture? While I didn’t ask students to write lyrics about Katrina, I had asked them to write about something that was truly important and meaningful to them, and for many it was Katrina. What they had been unable to write about in September in their journals, they were now able to write about in song and in essays explaining their songs. Perhaps it was the distance in time, perhaps the new media, perhaps the community experience, but finally my classes

were able to address the storm experience in writing that was deep and powerful. From the 40 songs (and sketches explaining them), I selected a dozen to send to two professional musicians and from these, four songs were finally recorded. Two dealt specifically with Katrina, one was about love, and the last concerned a work of art we had viewed on a field trip. However, all four songs were used in the radio program because producer Todd Delaney was able to see something that I had missed—how songs not about Katrina still captured something of the storm and could contribute to the radio program.

What are the lessons in this music assignment that we all should note? Taking a chance, trying something new, finding ways to make an outrageous idea (writing lyrics) fit required course goals (expository writing) is still possible, even in college English. Giving students choice and ownership and letting students write about subjects they care about increases motivation, helps build the writing community, and seems to produce more powerful writing. A student is more likely to write well explaining her own poem to a class that doesn't know its meaning than explaining "Sailing to Byzantium" to a teacher who knows its meaning already better than she ever will. Combining creative writing with expository writing is possible, and the way each balances the other helps improve both. Using reflective sketches to help revise the creative piece is not only using writing in new, meta-cognitive ways, but also using writing to help produce better writing. Building one assignment organically out of another and thereby expanding the amount of writing is a natural way to provide more writing opportunities (and is easy to grade as one packet if the teacher uses portfolios). Giving students a chance to work with audiences outside the classroom (Internet audiences, musicians, etc.) can enhance their understanding of real world "writing situations," and publishing their own work—by having it read aloud, recorded, or anthologized—can add new dimensions to students' understanding and appreciation of writing.

As a writer, Writing Project director, book editor, and teacher, I was impacted by Hurricane Katrina and learned the following:

As a writer: Sometimes you have to wait, and that is okay. It has taken me almost two years, a radio program, and a book before I could really write about the storm in detail and in my own voice. I am very dependent on my journal, but in this experience my journal failed me. I think with those deepest experiences, if we write when we are too close to them, we are doomed to failure or to not writing true. Sometimes distance is necessary.

As a Writing Project director and editor: The Writing Project taught me the importance of teachers teaching each other and how we are all dependent on each other from kindergarten through college. It also taught me to recognize the value of ownership, choice, and diversity in what we do. When I think of *Katrina in Their Own Words*, I think of teachers who were willing to showcase their students' work and to write alongside their students. I think of writers who did not have to be made to write but who wrote because the topic was important to them and because they wanted their experiences to be shared and their voices heard. I think, too, how different their experiences and voices and talents are and how important it is for us to recognize and respect those differences.

As a teacher: You have to look for the "teaching moment," and be ready to go with it when it comes. I believe in taking chances, in serendipity, in the importance of being open to the moment, in trusting my instincts and trusting my students. I did a music assignment because in my gut I felt it was great. And with a little thought, I made it fit my curriculum. As a result, I received some of the best, most memorable writing I've ever had from freshmen. And also as a result, a blog which had been gathering dust was transformed into a radio program and a book. Take a chance and it may lead to significant

things you could never imagine. Which, by the way, is a good lesson to teach to your students.

The Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, is one of about 200 National Writing Project sites in the country and one of five in Louisiana. All NWP sites are university-based programs that hold summer institutes for teachers to study the teaching of writing and support activities (such as workshops, retreats, electronic networks, etc.) during the school year to support writing teachers and their students.

Student Writing from *Katrina in Their Own Words*

Until Last Week

Ude Amobi, from Nigeria

Until last week, I only read novels and watched movies in which places were hit by very devastating storms called hurricanes. I never imagined in a lifetime finding myself in a similar disastrous situation. The word to describe how I felt when the storm hit would be utter shock.

I was at the 24-hour lab where I work as a lab attendant when the phone rang. I picked up the phone and it was my supervisor on the other line. She ordered me to go ahead and close the lab for the day as a hurricane was anticipated to hit the southeastern part of Louisiana. That got me a bit worried and anxious. I got home to my apartment and met some of my neighbors talking about the expected storm and how they planned to evacuate to nearby towns and states. I told them they were overreacting, that the storm was probably not going to affect us and hence, I had no intention to evacuate. Boy, was I wrong.

On the day of the storm, I was sleeping on the couch when I was brought back to consciousness by a sharp noise. I peeked through my window and for the first time ever saw the wind moving at almost 100 miles per hour. I instantly lost all the braveness in me and became

as frightened as a little child just thinking about how possible it was that I might not live to tell the story. I stood close to the window and watched the storm unleash its power. It blew my bike away from where it was parked and forced most of the trees to bow to its superiority.

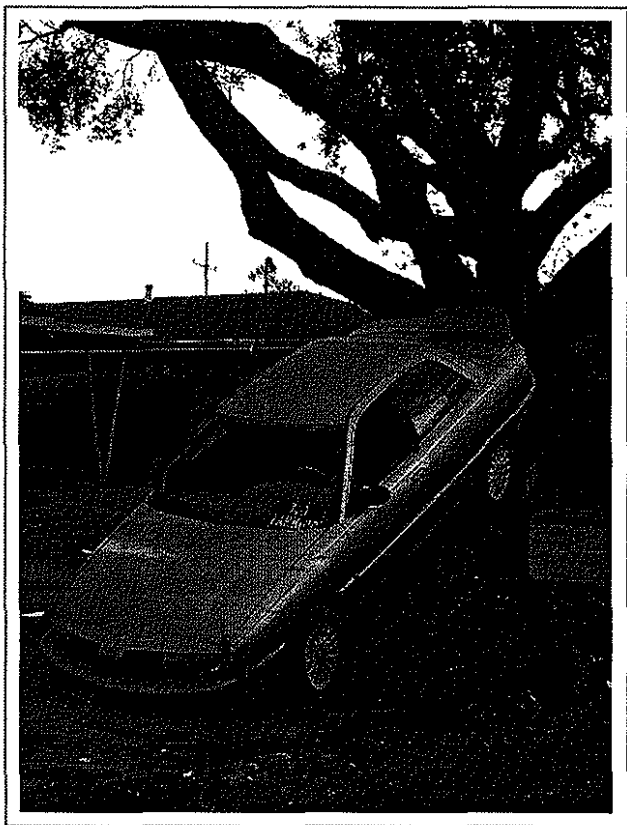


Photo Credit: Patty Steib

I was brought back to reality when the power went off abruptly in my apartment. I remember feeling like I was part of a horror movie. I reached quickly for the phone to call my family only to find out the

phone was dead. At that juncture, it dawned on me that I needed a miracle to stay safe.

I swiftly made my way to the room, lay down on the bed and basically blamed myself for not evacuating when I had the chance to. I went on my knees and prayed to God to keep me and others safe. That was the last thing I remembered doing. I woke up later that day excited, having realized I made it out safe. I headed for the window again, looked out and could not see the yard as it was covered with fallen trees and leaves. I also observed that some of the cars parked across the street were badly damaged by the trees that fell on them.

I took a sigh of relief and thanked God profusely for sparing my life. This experience was so horrifying and devastating that I would not wish it on my worst enemy.

What Happened To Me the Day of the Storm

Ty Booker

I don't watch much television, so to hear a hurricane was heading for Louisiana was a scare. Earlier in the week, I was talking to my sister and she had informed me a storm was brewing in the Gulf. I paid little to no attention because every storm since Andrew in '98 was supposedly due to hit Louisiana directly and didn't. As a matter of fact, Andrew is the only "big" storm I can remember. Vivid images come to mind: pine trees emitting their signature smells from the freshly cracked wood lie in the street like barricades. For about a week my family survived on Cheerios and Spam; it was all we had. Since then, a hurricane only meant a day or two off from school and Louisiana dodging the bullet one more time. Friday, August 26th, my cousin and I drove to New Orleans to pick up another relative. We took for granted the scenery and simple pleasures of the city. We never realized what lay ahead.

I have always been a hard-headed person, so this particular weekend I'd decided to stay on campus. My cousin traveled back to Baton Rouge alone to go to work while I stayed in Hammond, ignorant to the events that lay ahead. On Saturday, the calls flooded my cell phone. Everyone called to tell me about Katrina. Finally, after 20 phone calls, I decided to turn on the television. There she was: coming straight for New Orleans. I was only a city or two away. Every channel and every news bulletin carried the same, yet simple message: Get out while you can! As I watched her turn like a propeller, it all became a grim reality: we were going to be hit and hit hard. I had nowhere to go. Here I was on the fourth floor of Livingston Hall in my room with a Category Five hurricane headed for a city only 52 miles away.

I knew I needed to stock up on food if I was going to be here to endure the storm. Cayman's was closed, and the Lion's Den wasn't an option. The only thing I had was my SLU ID, so I decided to make a vending-machine run. After three trips to the electric snack havens, I figured that I had enough. The last time I walked across the barren, deserted parking lot, a man in Army fatigues caught my eye. Curiosity took over and I went to inquire as to why he was on campus.

He proceeded to explain that the Kinesiology and Health Studies building was being used as a shelter for ill people. As he continued to ramble on, my thoughts began to come into focus: this was serious. I pretended to listen, but only a few words stuck out in my mind: dorms closed, University Center, shelter. I thanked him, walked away, and those words formed themselves into two ton bricks, each falling upon me like rain; each one came faster than the one before. I realized he had just told me we had to evacuate the dorms and take shelter in the University Center. I panicked, packed up my belongings as if it were check-out time and waited for the all-call. At about 5:15 p.m., the clouds couldn't take the pressure as they succumbed to the rain, surrendering themselves peacefully without a fight. The wind picked up and there I was running to the University Center on North Campus

with the few belongings that I could grab. The wind began to howl like a werewolf in the night: this was the one! Katrina was here and she was as strong as two oxen.

I made it to the University Center soaked but safe. I looked around, found a spot and made myself at home. I drifted off into a deep sleep, the last peaceful night of rest I would get for a while. When I did awake, I heard University President Randy Moffett on the loudspeaker telling us that Katrina was in fact here and she was marking her territory all around us as he spoke. He told us we were in the worst two or three hours of the storm and we had no water or lights until the generators could be powered up. I went to the window that looked out on University Avenue and surveyed old oak trees thrown around as if they were small branches. As I took all this in, I couldn't help but think: this isn't the worst, this is only the beginning.

When we were let out of the University Center on Tuesday, August 29th, the water was on, but cold, and there was still no electricity. I came back to a dank, dark dorm room, but I was thankful to have survived and to have a place to call home to come back to. Later in the day, my cousin came back to pick me up; I was relieved and cried tears of joy. I was grateful to be back in Baton Rouge with my family and out of harm's way. However, once I arrived, I realized the devastation Katrina's wrath had caused along the Gulf Coast. When I turned on the television, I thought it was something unreal: I couldn't even have imagined what I saw—houses submerged to their roof, a whole city flooded. It was then that I thanked the heavens above for allowing me to be fortunate and it was then that I vowed never to take life's simple gifts for granted.