



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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HOW HURRICANE KATRINA CHANGED ME AS A TEACHER

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005. The day afterwards, the 17th Street canal levees broke. The break was three blocks away from our modest home on Bellaire Drive. My husband, his family, and I had evacuated to Texas. From our hotel room, we watched the terrible scene in New Orleans. It was like watching hell in slow motion. I will always remember the images: bloated bodies floating in the water, children ferrying grandparents on makeshift rafts through chest-high water, throngs of desperate people waiting in the heat at the Superdome and the Convention Center for buses that never came.

As a long-time educator at Delgado Community College, I remember thinking that if only we had educated more people, fewer would have been left behind without the knowledge or resources to leave. I realized that education was no longer just a nice thing to have; it was now a matter of survival. Without education, people do not get jobs; and without jobs, they cannot fill up their tanks with gas or pay for a few nights at a hotel. I returned to work as soon as I could with a renewed sense of purpose. Since my return, I have found that my teaching and my perspective on teaching have changed.

I now feel more connected with my colleagues and my students. After the hurricane, it became evident that we needed each other to heal and rebuild. The city remained under mandatory evacuation for two or three months. When my husband and I returned, we lived for a few months in a hotel room and then for a year in a FEMA trailer on Delgado's campus. During this time, we continued our work at Delgado Community College. The main campus at City Park did not have power until December; so available faculty, staff, and administrators worked together in places such as Baton Rouge, a small computer lab on the West Bank campus, and even from flood-damaged homes. From these places, the reopening of the City Park Campus was planned, and teachers were kept apprised of what was happening at school.

When the students came back in January, we knew we had to be gentle and flexible with them. Like the teachers, many of the students had lost their homes or family members. We were all in post-traumatic stress. Everyone needed to rebuild their lives and their houses. Cell phones were allowed in class because everyone had to take phone calls from FEMA or their contractors. It was understood that meetings with government agents or with electricians and plumbers had to take priority. Assignments were accepted late, and absences were excused.

Most important, Delgado staff and students needed to tell their stories. A member of the campus police force talked about having to care for scores of people from the Delgado neighborhood who took shelter in Building One. After staying for three days without help, he and his fellow officers had to lead everyone out through the water and over the train tracks to the I-10 overpass. A student cried when she talked about how the police rescued her by boat and then shot her beloved dogs because they would have no way to survive. Another student could not find his brother for days. Understandably, as we shared these stories and went through the rebuilding process together, we all became more connected to one another.

Now, almost five years after the hurricane, I have come to understand that we all suffer the results of one "hurricane" or another. Poverty, divorce, war, the loss of a loved one or job, and like traumas are all hurricanes in our lives. The world can be a dangerous and unforgiving place. Therefore, I try to make my classroom a shelter from the storm—a place in which students feel welcome and safe. When students walk in late, I greet them because I am so happy to see them safe and sound. Some drive in daily from small Louisiana towns and parishes, crossing bridges that are 20 to 30 miles long before navigating the heavy morning traffic to reach school. Others make 8:00 a.m. classes after working the late hours required by the New Orleans service and hospitality industry. As a bumper sticker might say "Life Happens," and I understand and accept that students have to be away sometimes to take care of their health, families, and jobs.



Thanks to the storm, I have realized the vital importance of education. I have realized that we as human beings are joined by mutual feelings of loss, grief, and sadness. Fortunately, we are also joined by feelings of joy, love, and hope. Since the storm, I can more closely identify with and understand my students' struggles and successes because they are mine as well. The hopes, dreams, optimism, faith, and determination that students bring to the classroom are contagious. My students nourish, inspire, and heal me as an educator and as a person. For this, I will never be able to thank them enough!

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