

An Investigation of Faculty and Student Experiences and the Move to Online Learning Following Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract

In this paper, we provide a discussion of the experiences of faculty and students from the University of New Orleans during and following hurricanes Katrina and Rita to consider the implications for online teaching and learning. In addition to anecdotal discussion of faculty experiences, we examine representative postings from approximately 300 business students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. We consider what lessons can be learned about the role of the university in a disaster situation, the Katrina disaster, in this case. Our emphasis is on the role of online instruction in such situations. We provide a number of general findings about the student experiences and illustrate what occurred with excerpts from their online postings.

Keywords: online learning, disaster recovery, online teaching, student support, universities and disaster

Introduction

This paper is intended to provide a discussion of the experiences of faculty and approximately 300 business students from the University of New Orleans during and after the Katrina disaster. The students were at the graduate and undergraduate levels. We report their experiences to consider what can be learned about issues centering upon the role of the university in a disaster situation. Our emphasis is upon the role of online instruction in such situations. We provide a number of general findings about faculty and student experiences and illustrate with excerpts from student online postings.

The Setting

The University of New Orleans (UNO) is located on the lakefront of Lake Pontchartrain near one of the key areas where the levees breached during Hurricane Katrina. Prior to the storm, approximately 17,000 students were enrolled in graduate and undergraduate programs, with the business school the largest college on campus. The UNO student body has been primarily non-traditional, with an average age of over 27. Most work full or part time and many have families. Because of the attractiveness of New Orleans as an "international" city, many foreign students have traditionally been enrolled. Importantly for this study, most students and faculty preferred to live on the lakefront to be near to the University, and, as a result, when the flooding occurred, a large percentage of both students and faculty sustained heavy losses. Most were evacuated. Moreover, while much of the University itself, which is situated on a raised area which was the former site of an airfield, did not flood, 20% of the campus, including all of the University's Information Technology (IT) capabilities, were flooded and destroyed.

In the weeks immediately following the disaster, a skeleton crew of University officials gathered in Baton Rouge, 80 miles northwest of the city, where they were provided temporary office space, and began planning how the University should respond to the disaster. The result was a decision to open as an

online university on October 10, 2005, just over a month after the storm. The plan was risky – the University had offered almost no online courses in the past, faculty and students were scattered and few had computers with them, and almost none of them was trained in teaching or taking online instruction. Moreover, with no IT facilities, the decision was made to work through Blackboard™, a popular online teaching “platform” headquartered on the east coast. Blackboard™ agreed to provide the platform through its headquarters location, rather than attempting to set up at the University.

Note that the emphasis during this initial period was upon responding in a prompt and flexible manner to the events. What was in evidence was an ability to react quickly to the environment in ways which paralleled the ideas of classical contingency theory (e.g., Duncan, 1979; Morse & Lorsch, 1970; Ashkensas, Ulrich, Jick & Kerr, 1998). What was not in evidence were notions such as *contingency planning* or *active readiness*, from the crisis literature, emphasizing preparation for disaster *before* it occurs (see especially Connell & Drennan, 2006). Recently, and drawing upon recent crises including Hurricane Katrina, Mitroff, Diamond and Alpaslan (2006) have examined planning for crises in the college and university setting and have recommended that crisis management teams be formed *prior* to disaster situations and that they develop plans and establish contingencies prior to the disaster situation. Very little of this kind of thinking was in place in the New Orleans setting, a situation consistent with much of the Mitroff et al. findings.

One Instructor's Experiences

At this point, we shift the discussion to the experiences of the lead author of this research. While they cannot be described as typical – and perhaps there is no one typical faculty experience – they can be used to illustrate the challenges and rewards of what ensued. I was fortunate in that I had a summer home in the North Carolina Mountains where I was able to evacuate with family members, friends, and pets. However, because I expected to be gone only a few days, I had almost no clothing and no computer. Moreover, as the days passed, more and more faculty “joined” me, in a pattern which we will see re-occur in the findings of this research, as people first evacuated to emergency settings and then moved again, often repeatedly, to more secure spots. At a high point, some 17 people were with me and literally every bed, couch, blow-up mattress, and spot on the floor was taken. But we had no computers and none of us knew how to use the Blackboard™ or how to teach online. At this point, we were *extremely* fortunate that a former colleague was now teaching at a nearby university and had experience teaching online, although with a different platform from Blackboard™. Moreover, the nearby community college offered computers in its GED classroom which were not used by day, as well as help from a Blackboard™ instructor, who knew how to set up the Blackboard™ sites, but who was less familiar with teaching online. In effect, we had to locate textbooks and teaching materials, find ways to get them to students, and set up Blackboard™ courses, a situation generally analogous to setting up a website for the course and “discussion boards,” which were similar to chat rooms for course topics. We also learned how to test online, how to correspond with students via the Blackboard™’s e-mail capabilities and similar activities. It was an enormous task to be completed in a very short time.

It is interesting to note that my experiences echoed much of what other faculty reported in their informal discussions with me in the months after the storm. As was the case with me, most expected to be gone only a short while, brought very little with them, and were dismayed to discover that they would not be returning for a substantial period. Virtually everyone I talked to reported that they turned to the local colleges in the towns where they found themselves and that they were given a great deal of help and support.

Students and faculty alike learned that courses would be offered online through the University’s website, through the key New Orleans website, NOLA.com, which is affiliated with the newspaper, the *Times Picayune*, through the newspaper itself (which, remarkably, was up and running literally days after the storm) and through public service announcements in key evacuation cities, such as Houston and Dallas. In reasonably short order, the University’s e-mail platform was rebuilt and it proved a key communication tool in a situation where telephone service, both land lines and cell, were not working in the city and where most people had no way of knowing how to contact other evacuees. As students began to enroll, we, as faculty, next had to consider how to set up our online courses – a first-time experience for most of us, and as noted, doing this was made possible primarily because of support from colleges throughout the nation. Another consideration was text materials. The bookstore was destroyed and would not have been accessible to most faculty and students, even had it been intact. For these issues, the book

manufacturers were invaluable, and they typically made arrangements to ship to students directly or to bookstores in key evacuation cities. Many offered online texts.

Doing all of this was extremely time consuming, and my colleagues and I who were at my summer home in North Carolina became concerned that we would not be ready for the October 10 start-up. To gain us a little more badly-needed time, our mentor from the local university suggested that we set up an initial discussion board in each of our courses entitled "Getting to Know You" (GTKY), post our Katrina stories, and ask students for theirs. I followed his suggestion and was overwhelmed by the results. Nearly 100 stories, all raw, some courageous, others filled with humor or pathos, flowed in. It quickly became apparent that GTKY was serving an important purpose in giving students a vehicle for talking about and making sense of their experiences. I have continued to use GTKY every semester since the fall of 2005, as we are still operating online to a large extent. Students are often still evacuated and life in the city for those who have returned remains very difficult. As a result, I am still finding GTKY an extremely important tool for helping students "process" what has happened to them. The following excerpts from student postings may give an indication of what I have been seeing and why the online situation is important:

From Nicole, in my initial class, "Online courses give me a chance to regain normalcy."

Danielle: "Online course gave me the opportunity to grow stronger each day."

Ashley: "Grateful to have an online course and not have to wait a semester."

Sherrie (immediately after the storm): "I apologize for being so long winded, it's a hard story to condense, *particularly given this is my first time to tell it*. I'm really excited about classes starting to help keep my mind occupied. And, I'm anxious to see how the rebuilding process for our wonderful city pans out."

Bing, from China, was living in campus housing and lost everything when the apartment was flooded and looted. "I am in a wheelchair with no computer at home or at work. But I search for one so I can take these online courses."

Several, including Doyle, commented about how: "UNO online courses allow me to finish the degree I started at LSU." Doyle is a father with four children who has returned to complete his degree.

"I'm psyched about this class; let's do it," said Jason, in summary.

As is probably apparent, the fall, 2005 semester proved to be a challenging but very rewarding experience both for me and – judging from their comments – for the students as well. I still feel that way. Perhaps the strangest part of the experience is that I feel in most ways I know the students far better than I do those in the traditional classroom setting, especially because of GTKY – but I have no visual cues and no idea what they look like.

The final "piece" which led to this paper was a visit to Washington, DC, where I was able to catch up with a friend in private industry whose background and greatest interest is training. She was immediately intrigued by all of the stories, and when I confessed to being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material I had, she offered to analyze it and set it up in a format which we have used for analysis. My co-author is the unsung hero of this research!

The Students: General Findings and Illustrative Narratives

The full sample, at this point, consists of GTKY narratives from 311 students from graduate and undergraduate online business classes over the period fall, 2005 through spring 2007. Of these, 19 provided incomplete narratives to the point that we did not use them in our analyses, bringing the final sample to 292.

Interestingly, only 15, or less than 1%, were international students, a low number in terms of the University's traditionally high foreign student enrollment. We suspect that the number is low because many international students evacuated to their home countries after the storm and did not return to school. For those who *did* stay in the US and who returned to New Orleans, the experience was a

difficult one. Minh and Takura provide the following reports:

Minh:

Sunday 8/28/05, I stayed back on the Westbank as my family evacuated to Houston. It was a deadly silence and breezy Sunday afternoon to be sitting in front of my house watching the neighborhood...all Hi to everybody. I'm a senior in computer science and now also majoring in MIS and BA w/CSCI. I was about to finish up CSCI on Fall 05 but then Katrina happened. My hurricane experience is similar to what everybody has been through, but different from my own eyes. As Katrina was approaching LA, the houses were boarded up and nobody was on the streets....."What's all that noise, and why can't I see a thing" I said to myself as I was awakened by Katrina around 4am Monday morning. I can't fall back to sleep with the hollowing wind and rain outside. The house shifted and shook with every gust...if I go to sleep, I might wake up SOMEWHERE else! It was a horrible morning with Katrina at her peak. The rain fell sideways, and the wind carried trees and debris, as it traveled over the neighborhood. I sat behind a re-enforced door with small windows to watch Katrina's wrath...there went my street sign and my neighbor fence; pieces of roofing material were flying down the street. The only radio station on was Ch4; people called in from everywhere around town—they screamed and begged to be rescued but there was not much anybody could do in such intense conditions... those were the LUCKY ones. Unheard voices from people who were trapped and clinging on to dear life were also carried by the raging storm. Callers from Lakeview were claiming that the water was rising too rapidly—everybody assumed that the worst has happened, the levees were breached!!! I could only hear distress stories over the radio and watched the weather radar to pass the time. AMAZING that Katrina turned a few degrees toward the East as it was coming ashore. By late afternoon, the rain has stopped, and the sun was peaking out over the horizon. My brother and I ventured outside to look at the damages all over the Westbank. Everywhere houses were damaged, trees were down blocking streets, and pools of standing water engulfed cars in their tracks. The sunset seemed more beautiful with this second lease on life, but the night had an ominous calm. There wasn't any light around beside the stars in the new-moon sky...absolute darkness everywhere, over all over the horizon. By daybreak, EMS vehicles heading toward New Orleans were the only cars on the highways as helicopters crisscrossed the sky all day long. Ch4 broadcasted the first few images of the devastation...so much destruction and so many lives were lost in just ONE hurricane. My brother and I got enough supplies to last us a few weeks, but what is the point of staying in this desolated city. It was time to GET OUT for us as conditions were getting worst on the New Orleans side. All the cell phone communication networks were out but luckily the land lines still worked. We relayed our status to our family in Houston and packed our "livelihood" into the car and shut down the house for it could be months until things will be back to normal. Such memories inscribed into some of us different than some others. With my hectic school schedule, I have learned to appreciate the little time I do have for myself to sit back and watch the world turn.

Takura:

Hi everyone! I'm Takuro from Osaka, Japan and am living on Houma Blvd in Metairie now.

I studied international government and economic issues at Kinki University in Japan from 1997 to 2001. In order to develop the global awareness required to be successful in international business,

Prior to my arrival in the United States, I worked for Nidec Corporation in Japan from 2001 to 2004, a company that develops and sells small precision motors for computers. For 3-1/2 years, I was employed in the Sales Division of Nidec Corporation. Today, my goal is to earn an MBA and market EM (Effective Microorganisms) technology, an alternative to chemical fertilizers.

The following is my experience during Hurricane Katrina.

Aug. 27, 2005 - I heard the news on TV, that the greatest hurricane in American history, Katrina, might be coming to directly to New Orleans. My roommate from Taiwan, Nathan, suggested we

leave New Orleans and drive to Alabama in his car. But I refused because people in Japan always stay in their houses when our city is struck by a typhoon. I thought it would not be terrible. Nathan left for Alabama in the night and Ryohei, another IELP student from Japan, came to my house in the uptown district of New Orleans because he was kicked out of Bienville Hall by a janitor.

Aug. 29, 2005 - In the early morning, New Orleans was hit by Hurricane Katrina. My house was shaking so badly I couldn't sleep. When I looked out of the window it was unearthly and I thought what a hell!!! The electricity was already cut off, the roof of my house was destroyed by the strong wind, and trees near my house were blown down by the gale.

New Orleans was within Hurricane Katrina until noon. Early in the evening, at around 4:00 p.m., I went outside and walked along St. Charles Avenue. It was too hard for people to walk because many trees lay on the street along with a lot of broken glass. At night, I couldn't see anything because the lights had already gone out.

Aug. 30, 2005 - There were a lot of ordinary people, homeless people, and gangsters on the street who attacked the grocery stores to get food, water, and things they needed. At that time I had no food so I decided to join the people who attacked the store and get some food and water. I had no choice. I just had to choose whether I would die or attack. Suddenly a police officer who was driving a patrol car appeared and stopped us from taking things. At this moment I thought that police were an enemy to us. People said that somebody shot a police officer with a gun; I think that's why he didn't try to arrest us.

Aug. 31, 2005 - I got up in the morning because of a bad smell. I saw the shadow of water on the ceiling. Why? I looked out the window. I saw a flood on the street in front of my house. According to the radio, Lake Pontchartrain was damaged. That's why it flooded. I was worried about the damage from the flood. As expected, New Orleans stopped the supply of water. I just listened to the radio that day.

Sept. 1, 2005 - In the dead of night, at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., I was awakened by the sound of a low voice from my backyard. I timidly went to the window, and just then I saw two guys talking in my backyard. They seemed like gangsters attacking my house. But, at the same time, an old person who lived next to my room coughed, so I think that they heard that sound and gave up their plan to attack my house. I guessed that maybe there wasn't enough food at the store and they had no more food or water. That's why they broke into my backyard. I made up my mind to go to the Superdome in the morning.

I went to the Superdome, walking in water for several hours. When I got near the Superdome, the U.S. Army stopped me and others. Why? I listened to the radio and they said, please come to the Superdome as soon as possible. If you do that, you can be safe. But what they were saying on the radio was quite different from the facts. There was a great difference between what I had heard and what I actually saw. Once there, I learned that people had been kept waiting for 3 days! What a hell!

There were a lot of people around the Superdome; the crowds stretched as far as the eyes could see. To my surprise, I couldn't distinguish the ordinary people from the homeless. Of course I also looked like a homeless person. It was like the Third World. When I tried to enter the Superdome, I couldn't. I couldn't see anything because there was no electricity. Everyone relieved themselves everywhere in the Superdome. It was so stinky that I couldn't stand it any more. I left.

I went to the bus station, trying to get on a bus going to Houston. There was a crowd of people. I waited a long time but was never able to get on. It was terrifically hot and humid. People started fighting with each other. There was booing, crude heckling, and countless swear words. I was dizzy and gave up trying to get to Houston that day.

I hit upon a good idea after I took a rest. I went to talk with the U.S. Army. I told them a lie. While I was showing my passport, I explained my situation like this. I said, "I'm from Japan. I

have to return to Japan as soon as possible because I have a serious visa matter. How can I return to Japan immediately?" The soldier said, Ok, we'll transport you by helicopter. But sick people go first. After that we will call you. I told them I understood and thanked them very much.

I slept outside of the Superdome after I ate a box dinner from the U.S. Army. When I looked up at the night sky, it was star-studded. Because we didn't have electricity, I could enjoy the sight of shooting stars.

Sept. 2, 2005 - I got up early in the morning. I felt it gradually became hotter and more humid. I continued to wait for my turn on the helicopter with a crowd of people while I was listening on the radio. At 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., the U.S. Army finally came for me. They led the way to the heliport. I shook hands with a captain of the U.S. Army. I was really excited because I saw a military helicopter without doors! As soon as I got on the helicopter, the helicopter took off into the air. When I looked down from the air, I could see some houses suffering from fire and enveloped in smoke. Almost all of New Orleans was flooded. The helicopter flew over Lake Pontchartrain and the bayou. I was so impressed by the scenery from the air. About one hour later I arrived at the Baton Rouge heliport.

After that my long trip to Los Angeles by way of Houston, El Paso, and Phoenix started.

What did the US citizens – many of them New Orleans natives - experience? A total of 217, or 78.1%, reported that they evacuated. Jonathan was one who rode out the storm and evacuated later. He reports:

I am 27 years old and live in Metairie, La. in a house I purchased last year. Luckily I didn't have any major damage to my house from Katrina. In fact the little damage I had inspired me to finish the remodeling of my home. I am working with a commercial contractor dealing with several local businesses that have relocated their offices outside of New Orleans. It has been a very rewarding experience being a part of the rebuilding process here at home. It feels good to see people and local businesses putting their lives back on track.

I got to experience Hurricane Katrina right on the riverfront in downtown New Orleans. My family and I decided to "hunker down" at the riverfront Hilton. Boy, that was an experience I will never forget. Long story short, we stayed... the storm came in... they evacuated everyone to the 2nd and 3rd floors due to the possibility of windows blowing out (did I mention the water was swishing around in the bathtub from the building swaying)... the storm ended... we left for Houston where we stayed for a month. At least there was a happy ending because everyone was safe.

I am happy to be enrolled in school right now. I am eager to share my experiences with other people. I think these events have changed all of our lives in some way. Good Luck to everyone!!!

Other thoughts on the horrific period immediately after the breaches:

From Olivia: My fiancé is in the National Guard and worked in the Superdome. He helped many people and watched many people die. He will never be the same."

Steele was "...with my parents; we busted out of the roof and swam to a 2-story house and waited there until we were picked up by a boat."

Of those who evacuated, only 8 reported a return to the city within one week. Mary Claire reports her experiences on an early return:

Hi, my name is Mary Claire. I am 24 and currently live in Metairie. I am originally from Alexandria, LA; I was lucky enough to grow up on a farm. I graduated from LSU (geaux tigers!) with a degree in electrical engineering. Pre-Katrina I lived uptown. I was very lucky, the house that my roommates and I were renting was built off of the ground and we had no flood damage. Unfortunately for the majority of my neighbors, their houses were built on slabs and flooded. My roommates and I decided to move to Metairie in November. The weekend before the storm hit, I went home to Alexandria to celebrate my birthday with my family. I knew that there was hurricane in the Caribbean headed for the gulf. I thought it was headed to Florida—boy was I wrong. My

boss called me on Saturday and asked me where I was. He told me to stay put, and that the storm was supposed to hit the metro area on Monday. He also told me to get back to the Westbank once the storm had passed the area. I work as an engineer for Entergy; my work area consists of Algiers, West Jefferson, and Plaquemines Parish. So Tuesday the 30th, I left Alexandria around 3:30am and headed south. After going through several police and military checkpoints, I was able to get to my office on the Westbank. Needless to say those first days after the storm were scary. I had worked in hurricane damage before, but they were in Florida, not here, not my home.

We had guys from work missing who lived in Chalmette and the East that had stayed for the hurricane. No one could find them; thankfully two of our guys were picked up off their roofs by rescuers in boats. There were rumors and reports about people getting attacked at hospitals, the Superdome and the Convention Center. Then the Oakwood Mall caught on fire. Unfortunately this is all that the national news media reported on. My parents couldn't get in touch with me for about two weeks due to my lack of power and telephone. After watching the news, they were picturing the worst case scenario. I didn't work in New Orleans so I can't comment on anything that happened there, but I did work in the Algiers area the first month after the storm. I saw the people there helping not only their neighbors and friends, but complete strangers. Now I am working down in the Port Sulphur/Buras/Venice area. I am amazed at the resiliency of the people that live down there. They are determined to make a comeback. One man told me that his family had lived in Buras since the early 1900's and that he has to rebuild, it is in his blood. Katrina did make me take a step back and really evaluate what I hold important in my life. We all saw a bad side of human nature in the aftermath of the storm, but I know that I also saw a great deal of good. I know that it will take years before things get somewhat back to "normal", but I believe in the saying "that which does not kill us only makes us stronger".

Other experiences of early returnees:

Jimmy, a policeman (NOPD), worked in the Superdome. Jonathan was on a search and rescue boat and saved five lives, but had to leave others who didn't want to leave their homes. Ava and her husband (also NOPD), lived on a Carnival Cruise ship. David, an electrical engineer, "flew over NO in a helicopter to identify main leaks and valves." Christina returned with her Mom, a nurse, and "...lived without electricity, helping others." Rebecca returned to her job as a Traffic Assistant for NO Clear Channel Radio. Jill commented, "one week after Katrina, I snuck back into Lakeview; the police caught me and sent me to the Arena to be decontaminated. It was humiliating."

What about those who remained evacuated? While many initially found their way to relatively comfortable conditions, 71, or nearly 33% of those who evacuated experienced extreme difficulties, generally with multiple moves, extremely crowded and sometimes dangerous conditions, with many people crowded into extremely cramped quarters or in shelters lacking the most basic services, like water, electricity, toilets and phone service. The pattern which appeared to emerge was of multiple moves, as this group attempted to find more secure living conditions. Here are Georgiana's experiences:

Hi, my name is Georgiana and this is my story. I am a paralegal and a part-time student at UNO pursuing a BA degree with a minor in Management, Computer Informational Systems. Until the Friday before the storm, I didn't know there was a storm! You see, for three weeks I had been out-of-town attending a trial. My family never mentioned the storm; they thought it would hit Florida! That Sunday we evacuated to Mississippi then to Houston. Hats off to Texas, they were wonderful. I took all my essentials [my swimsuit and beach towel]. I was ready for a vacation and looking forward to returning shortly. I prepared the house for 3-4 feet of water, not the 10-1/2 feet of standing water that I got for 3+ weeks. Evacuating was the wisest decision I could have made, we would have died in my home. I lived in St. Bernard [formerly known as "da Parish"]. My Chalmette home was 2 blocks from the 40 arpent canal and near MRGO (note that "Mr Go" is a New Orleans acronym for the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal, which sustained a storm surge which was a major contributor to the levee breaches). The canal levee breached near my home as did MRGO. According to a parish engineer the wave crested at 25 feet and the tidal surge was 22-1/2 feet. The force of the water was so strong that my front door ended

up in the den. Between the flood water [18 inches on the second floor] and the roof damage, nothing could be saved.

The only living things that survived in my home were the snakes, frogs and other marsh creatures that came in with the 12 inches of mud. I do feel lucky though, I got the small stuff and my neighbor got the cow! It's amazing how much you learn about the marsh ecosystem; 4 months after the storm things were still hatching! I am happy to report that the house is now clean and I have a FEMA trailer sitting in my driveway. I can't live in it [no utilities], but one day the government will surprise me and connect my electricity. Until then, I and my family [party of 5] are staying in Destrehan with my oldest daughter and her family. This storm has affected all of us. I have lost my home and way of life, I will be forever changed, but it is not all bad. It is amazing to see how many positive changes have taken place in my personal/professional life and in the lives of my family/friends. I am looking forward to the future.

Of those who stayed, most reported that they stayed because their jobs kept them in the city. Several key groups were hospital workers, those maintaining IT services, those in areas such as National Guard or police, and other healthcare workers. Another group was comprised of individuals who decided to stay and then went on to assist with the relief effort. Here is how Abner reports his relief work:

My name is Abner. I am a first semester grad student and graduated in the Spring of 05 from Southern University. I was in New Orleans for 6 days. Three of those days were spent helping rescue women and children from American Can apartments located on Orleans Avenue where I was staying with my cousin. With the help of 5 others and 3 NOPD officers, we rescued over 80 people and brought them to choppers via boat. I then spent 3 days on the Causeway in the heat, watching the elderly and children suffer daily. I stayed until the last day helping people get water and food. I could not move the last day due to an infection that started to grow on my feet from being in the polluted water. I am separated from family and friends and hope that everyone affected can find peace of the mind and soul. My heart goes out to all. I'm currently in Houston and hoping to come back to the city in the Spring. It's true you never truly miss something until it is gone. I wish the best to all of the returning students and hope this semester runs smoothly

Barbra stayed because her husband worked at Charity Hospital. She gives the following report:

My name is Barbra and I am a senior and I am looking forward to finishing up. The closer I get to graduating, the more nervous and anxious I become. I am a General Studies major with an ILP in Early Childhood Education. I now reside in Harvey where I was residing before the storm. Our hurricane Katrina damage was really minimal compared to some people.

The whole Katrina experience was terrible though. I had to evacuate to my husband's job (Charity Hospital) which is where I worked as well pre-Katrina, except he was on duty. We had our 2 oldest granddaughters with us there for 5 days; no lights, water, or food for at least 3 of those days. The girls were crying to get out of there and so was I. It took the rescue team 5 whole days to evacuate everyone. Then we boarded school buses and they didn't know where to take us. Finally, someone says to take us to Baton Rouge, so there we were on our way to Baton Rouge with no clue as to where we would be staying. Anyway after arriving I called my brother to pick us up, he already had 20 people living at his house and we added 4 more people. Well, the next day, I started making calls and found us a one bedroom apartment in Gonzales, where we remained until we were able to return home in October.

Post Katrina, things are looking a little better for my family and me. I still some siblings who have not been able to return home because their homes were totaled, but overall things are progressing.

So I want to say hello to everyone.

What did the evacuees find when they returned home? For 71, or 32.7% of the evacuees, the report was that they had "major losses" to "lost everything." From Tricia, in one of the hardest-hit areas:

My home is in the Lower 9th Ward. Twice flooded, horribly damaged. My husband and I went to see it about a week ago. The only thing I brought back was 3 buckets. They must have floated on the water. I had a lot of software in those buckets and family pictures. The rest is history. I received my undergraduate degree in 2004 with a minor in management and a paralegal certificate a few years earlier (all from UNO). I like UNO. I'm just frustrated. I recently left the legal field to open a small business bookkeeping service. Most of my clientele were in the 9th Ward, so that strategy is squashed. Talk about restructuring... My husband is an electrician and has recently left Riverdale, Ga. for New Orleans. His previous employer called him back. According to him, things are moving really slow. He's living in his mother's apartment on the Westbank, thankfully. We'll just have to play it by ear. I don't feel comfortable uprooting our daughters again (4 & 7 years old). They like their schools. On the other hand, I've put a lot of planning and resources into this venture. I can see giving up that easily. I'm still thinking...

Anyhow, I'm looking forward to class. Sandy, you *are* funny. (As a note, this was a student who was in a "physical" class with me for one week before the storm!) I happened to bring my book with me for the ride to Georgia so I'm ready when you are. God bless everyone with a speedy recovery. Tricia

For Sabrina, it was a house and business:

Hello All! I'm looking forward to another semester of internet classes, haha. After being a Floridian for 3 weeks post-Katrina, my family and I are back in our hometown of Lafitte, La. We made it through Hurricane Katrina virtually unscathed, only to have Rita bring 5 feet of water into our house and business. My sister and I owned and operated the only tanning salon in the city, and we were open only 1 month before the hurricane. It was fun while it lasted, and now we get to start over from scratch. Right now, I have one of the most interesting jobs out there, I work for Allstate Insurance. I am a licensed support staff in the Lisa Matherne Agency located in Gretna, La. I have been there only 2 years, but the experiences I have had in the last 6 months compare to no other job I have ever had. Before working for Allstate Insurance I taught Kindergarten for 4 months, which reaffirmed to me that I do not belong in a classroom. Before that I obtained my bachelor's degree in Political Science from LSU, and worked for the family business, Cajun Consulting and Inspection, Inc., a company specializing in Oilfield construction and site clearance, which has now branched out into equipment rentals and sales, as well as owning one of only 3 water weight rental companies in the world. It's been an interesting ride so far, and obviously, my family experiences have molded my choices in school.

My notable Katrina story is the fact that 3 days before the hurricane, my grandfather was operated on and had parts of his lung removed due to cancer. He stayed in West Jefferson Hospital for 3 days after the storm, and doctors would not let him leave. On the third day, doctors told his girlfriend to get him out if she could but her car was destroyed and she could not go. My father and uncle bribed their way onto the Westbank with trucks full of food and water in order to get into the city just to get them out. The day they were gone to retrieve my grandfather and his girlfriend was one of the most worrisome days of my life. Knowing that all of our earthly possessions could have been lost, those were just things, the prospect of losing family members was a feeling I never want to experience again.

Later that day we got a call that they had moved my grandfather from Marrero to Lafayette, and from that day on we became Acadians and left Florida. He is fine now, and we are all in the process of rebuilding our homes and lives. I'm looking forward to this semester hoping it brings back the sense of normalcy that we have all been missing. Thanks!!

Anna reports:

Well, my 8 year old daughter and I evacuated late Sunday before the storm. My boyfriend stayed home in Chalmette. He refused to leave. I cried and cried and I begged and begged. I never stay during a storm, if they encourage us to leave. I have a child to care for and I can't fight for her life and my life if it came down to it. After about 5 days, I figured out he was alive. That part was hard!! It's a long story and in his words...his house filled up with water in approximately 20 minutes.

He and I (only!) gutted the house in Chalmette. It took freaking forever! I have good photos and good video. Most of my things were still in storage on the Westbank, so I really didn't lose all those things you hear people talk about. I mean, my greatest loss, was his precious, precious baby picture. That hurts the same today! We're not back in the house, but eventually.....

Several additional overall findings about student experiences are notable when the postings are examined. One of these is that those who reported that they had minimal losses also stepped in to aid the relief efforts, often with activities such as gutting houses. For some, months and often years, passed by and they were unable to return. Typically, issues such as work in a new location, care of elderly relatives, or schooling of their own children prevented return. The tone of many of these postings is one of deep sadness as they report knowing "what it means to miss New Orleans."

Here is how Anna described her feelings and her boyfriend's experiences in a subsequent posting:

Well ya'll there it sits...It isn't in my name, but it is in my heart. I didn't lose my valuable childhood photos, I hadn't moved in quite that much....But when it was lost - it took all of his stuff. Everything. It almost took him. He fought a hard battle [note: Anna said that he reported that the house filled with water in 20 minutes and he barely made it to safety].

But - where do we both long to be?

Ventura Street...

in Chalmette. It was just a regular house on the outside, but...a place of solitude and peace on the inside.

It has been 1year, 6months, and 20 days since the chaos began. The house is gutted (that took about 3months – no help, just he and I), the house in compliance so that we are not charged \$100/day and we even have the electricity box in place. No lights but...we are ready to go...

Yet we are still waiting...

The problems that seem to be in the way of getting back are our solid choices to do just that. Some of those choices that may lead us nowhere. Some of the choices that may lead us to have to start over again!

Part of me wishes we would listen to nothing. Stories like the cost of insurance for living in the area or rumors like Murphy ['Murphy' refers to the oil company which is based in Chalmette and whose seepages produced further environmental problems post-storm] is going to buy the whole area. Wondering if we'll get enough money from the Road Home Program. Even if we can survive all of that...will we have neighbors? Will it be safe to live there? If you ride down Ventura – there are only a handful of FEMA trailers, not a lot of signs of a busy future.

I'm lost, I don't feel the objectives are clear. The only clear objective in my path is where I want to be. The problems are scattered everywhere – some are clear and some are not. Seems the people with loss can agree on what is needed and those making the decisions see things a different way. The only alternative there seems to be is live elsewhere – *but I don't want to!* The consequences that lie ahead are not known. The decision makers have rational ideas – but nothing is acted upon. I admire those who already have rebuilt in the areas that are uncertain. That is what I think we are going to do. Choices mean taking chances!

I wanna go home! I wanna know that I work hard everyday and I wanna go home because it's my choice to do so.

Finally, there are many reports that the students are grateful to be able to take classes online. These thoughts appear as early as GTKY and continue throughout subsequent discussion boards. For some, the report is that they remain evacuated and the availability of online classes means that they can complete their coursework and obtain their degrees. For others, taking class, even online, provides the only semblance of normalcy in lives which have been radically disrupted. Evidently, my reputation had preceded me, but here is what Ashley has to say:

Hello, Dr.Hartman and my new class; my name is Ashley and I am currently living in Houston, TX. I am 22 years old and I had just started work at UNO as a research graduate assistant along with getting my MBA. I was also working for an oil company downtown called Dominion. The company has been amazing and relocated 300 employees to Houston where they are taking care of us. I am so glad to hear that so many people are doing well. I am also grateful that we are still receiving this opportunity and not having to wait a semester. I look forward to this class and hearing all of Dr. Hartman's crazy stories.

For a final group, sharing experiences, especially at GTKY, provides a virtual "support group" to help them make sense of their situations. Remarkably, many are able to muster a great deal of resilience, humor, and a willingness to see positives as they support one another. Here is how Connie puts it:

Hello everyone. My name is Connie. Like many, the end result is that we had 12 inches of water in our house and 18 inches in our sunroom. My husband and I spent all Saturday afternoon boarding up our house but kept saying to ourselves things like, "We'll get high winds, but we'll ride it out. We don't want to leave. We haven't before, why would we now." By 10pm, my sister convinced us to leave as she had secured a room for us in West Houston. At midnight, we began moving cars to higher ground. We tried the parking lots of the Galleria, Lakeside Hospital and the Lakeway buildings, but to no avail. We ended up parking at the airport. By 2 AM Sunday, we heard Nagin on TV saying that he "wished" he could say he was authorizing a mandatory evacuation, but he "couldn't" as the City Charter wouldn't allow him to do so. We left by 5:30 am. Unfortunately, we couldn't convince my 84 year old father to go with us (and our four Pomeranians). I'm sure you've heard the story plenty of times: "I survived Betsy; I can survive this." He's since re-evaluated his position.

We arrived in Houston 14 hours later. Monday, the 29th of August, seemed like just any other day. Houston weather was beautiful. We drove around sightseeing. Then we started watching the devastation unfold on the TV. I couldn't get in touch with my father; phone lines were down. I tried for days. I was beside myself with grief, like so many others were (and still are, I'm sorry to say). But eventually I was able to get through. Thankfully, he was safe, but without a lot of basic necessities. He relayed to us the stories that unfolded over the WWL radio waves, for example, 18 people being stuck in an attic with a baby - no food - just looking to be rescued. Here we were in Houston, three days after Katrina, and finding ourselves in the position of having to find semi-permanent housing. It seemed unreal. Yet still, we were trying to get my father out without having him get on one of those buses. I have to say, however, that my father is very resourceful. He hitchhiked out to Jackson, MS four days after the storm hit to the safety of my sister's house. By the time we were able to come back to the city, I cried from the moment we entered St. Charles Parish all the way to our house. The loss of trees, the downed power lines, twisted metal, blown out windows, debris-blocked roads---everywhere the eye could see. The devastation was immense and overwhelming to say the least. We watched bugs crawling in our couch cushions and I couldn't help but cry over the loss of our contents. But, after getting over the initial shock of it all, I am a very lucky person. I still have my father, husband, and four Pomeranians. I lived in Houston for two months (and waited out Rita there, as well, safely). And now that we're back home, we're a family among thousands who have had to gut their house and are now awaiting electricians, plumbers, inspectors, etc., and who are also awaiting checks to be issued by the good graces of our insurance company. When we're not home, we're at Lowe's (Note – a home improvement store and currently the biggest business in the city). Perhaps I've even passed some of you in the aisles trying to find this or that. Who knows how long it will take to recover from all of this. I'd like to end my story by saying that I recognize my losses are not as great as numerous others, but my heart goes out to everyone, especially us students, just trying to hang on. The mere fact that we are trying to go to UNO during this reconstruction phase of our lives says a lot about our fortitude, our strength, and our goals. To continue on is quite a fete. My wish for everyone is that as each day passes, I hope one more goal is accomplished in your lives, no matter how big or how small. An accomplishment is just that: an accomplishment. Thanks for taking the time to read my story.

Bonnie comments:

My name is Bonnie. It was nice reading all of your stories just now. Some of the stories are amazing! In the midst of the whole Katrina disaster, rays of light still managed to shine through - someone got married to the love of his life and another had a baby boy while away from New Orleans. It is refreshing to hear such stories of miracle because it reminds us all that no matter how bad things get, things will always get better and fix itself over time. Even now, our town is slowly coming back to life. With the onset of each new day, more signs of hope are showing.

I know it has been a trying time for all of us. Believe me I know, my house still has no floors, no kitchen, and one functioning bathroom from the flood. But even so, we just have to see it as a new experience. I mean, before Katrina, if someone told me that I would currently know how to tear out, hang, and float sheetrock, I would have told them that they were crazy! Now, I can honestly tell you that I know the mechanics behind the art of sheetrock. I am proud to say that the sheetrock is done. I even dared to make a design and tile my own bathroom shower walls. It was definitely a new experience! I never knew so much prep work went into putting up tile. You have to prepare cement blackboard to the walls before putting on the tile. Then you have to measure and learn how to cut tile in certain shapes. It's definitely hard work, but I can proudly say that "I did it myself," which is a great feeling. Although, along the great feelings, I have discovered muscles in my body that I never knew existed (but that's another story; and it's nothing a good tube of Ben Gay® cannot fix.)

Anyway, before I start sounding like one of those "do-it-yourself" info-mercials, I will move on to telling you a little bit more about myself. As you have gathered, I am a moonlighting "contractor-in-training," but my real job is as a graduate assistant for the University of New Orleans. I am currently finishing my last semester of school for my M.S. in Tax. I am taking five classes, studying for the CPA certification exam, and working on my house on my free time in between school. So, as you may guess, I am already getting a healthy dose of physical and mental exercise each day. Upon graduation, I will do what all students dread -- that is, start working full-time and make the final transition into adulthood. Then I can start replaying the movie Office Space and noting correlations between me and Peter Gibbons (main character) in making "TPS reports." Just joking! I just love that movie too much for my own good. I really am excited to be finishing up my masters and to begin working full-time. It would be nice to put the skills I acquired in college to good use and start developing my analytical skills farther. Of course, the paycheck is an added bonus!

Life is definitely starting to look "normal" again. It seems like eons ago that my family and I became nomads and lived on the road. I was initially in Houston, TX, then I was in Baton Rouge, then I was Hammond, and finally back home. It is definitely nice being home. It's nice to be able to give out a physical address again. For awhile, my "permanent home address" was my car's license plate number (and I was not being sarcastic). In any case, I look forward to getting to know everyone better during the course of this semester. You all are my new "on-line buddies." (It's the newest rage to have on-line chat sessions apparently.) Here's to a great semester: "Cheers!"

Additional comments:

Kristy says, "Internet courses are an excellent way to increase my knowledge because I work at my own pace within the timed schedule, whenever it is convenient."

Robyn offers, "I'm excited to see UNO is offering courses online. I look forward to completing my program, mostly online."

Bessie says: "I am happy I can continue my studies thanks to UNO's online courses."

Richard points out he is "grateful UNO went to great lengths to get the school up and running with online courses."

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined instructor experiences and postings from 292 students describing their experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina. From an instructor perspective, the process was extremely difficult and time consuming and was made possible only through the generosity and support of colleges and faculty throughout the nation as well as text manufacturers. In the disaster situation, creative use of information dissemination tactics by university administrators and the city was invaluable and online teaching proved to be the needed vehicle for reaching students and restoring a sense of normalcy and purpose. For both faculty and students, the pattern which emerged is of lives severely disrupted and of great need to establish some form of stability and to “get on with their lives.” In this situation, online teaching provided an important vehicle for establishing stability, a support system, and a means for students and faculty alike to make sense of what had happened to them. Blackboard™ is, of course, an instructional tool, but in the disaster situation, it appeared to have value far beyond instruction.

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Manuscript received 30 Aug 2007; revision received 15 Feb 2008.



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