

# Hurricane Katrina from a Language and Literacy Perspective

by John G. Barnitz (University of New Orleans, USA)

## Introduction

Natural disasters - whether hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes or tsunamis – and the crises embedded within them are part of the lives of many citizens of our world. Language and literacy are also embedded in our lives in times of crisis. (See MacGillivray, 2010). Try reflecting on your own life experiences to explore how language, literacy, and disasters are interrelated.

As for me, I will always remember Hurricane Katrina: the evacuations, the devastation, the rescues, the recoveries and the miracles. As we reflect on important events in our lives, I believe we should consider the language and literacy implications for our students and for education in our homes, schools, and communities. There is hope for healing and recovery from disasters with language and literacy as part of the process. (See Bedford and Kieff, 2009; Trethewey, 2010).

## Surviving Hurricane Katrina

In 2005, hurricane season in Louisiana began on June 1st. The summer term at the University of New Orleans (UNO) began shortly thereafter. On August 26<sup>th</sup>, I attended a reception held by UNO's College of Education and Human Development. It was there that a colleague informed me that Hurricane Katrina was in the Gulf of Mexico. The storm shifted and began heading toward Louisiana.

On Saturday, August 27<sup>th</sup>, my family had to use all of our communication, literacy and critical thinking skills to prepare for a potential evacuation. Decisions had to be made about whether or not to board up the house, about whether to evacuate, and if so, where to go and which routes to take. We worked together to write lists of personal belongings, things to buy, and things to do.

The various skills which we required to gather information involved all six language arts: *speaking, listening, reading, writing, visual representation* and *viewing*. Especially important were the skills of interpreting hurricane tracking charts on TV and analyzing evacuation routes in brochures. After watching the Sunday evening TV news, we decided to evacuate the next morning for Shreveport, Louisiana, about 300 miles away, where we and others were welcomed by families of the People of Praise community.

Like many evacuees, we thought this was just another short evacuation trip after which we would return home in a few days as we'd done before for

Hurricane Andrew (1992), Hurricane George (1998) and Hurricane Ivan (2004). As usual, along with family and pets, I brought a few books along to read related to my literacy education courses.

Because of various kinds of damage to homes, schools, and businesses, many New Orleans and Gulf Coast residents could not return quickly. For several months, we watched the never-ceasing news of the horrific and heroic events following the storm, especially the massive flooding due to breaches in several levee walls. To comprehend newscasts on TV and the Internet, we had to process the images, audio narratives, and multiple prose texts that were rapidly presented on-screen.

We relied on a variety of communication technologies to learn about our homes and to communicate with our friends and family. Modern technology and human communication are truly invaluable during any national and natural disaster.

## Language and Literacy for Recovery

As part of our city's recovery after the storm, we had to learn about FEMA (*Federal Emergency Management Agency*), the Red Cross, SBA (*Small Business Administration*) and the Army Corps of Engineers. We also used a variety of complex multiple literacy skills to request and follow-up calls for assistance. All our language arts and multiple literacies were absolutely necessary for survival and recovery as we used our abilities via various technologies. All my Katrina experiences made me reflect on whether or not current skills approaches to literacy instruction are sufficient in preparing future citizens to use critical thinking and communicative abilities in preparing for and surviving different kinds of disaster. I believe our profession needs to examine this question in future.

After Katrina, we had to think about the University of New Orleans and our postponed Fall Semester. What about our colleagues, our students, our employment? Heroically, our administrators were able to establish alternate headquarters and to re-establish communications in time for the University to re-open and begin the fall semester in October. UNO was the only local university to re-open that semester. Because of damage to the campus and devastation in surrounding neighbor-hoods, many courses were taught at satellite campuses. Distance learning became an important option for delivering instruction with faculty and students scattered across the United States.

I had to learn rapidly how to teach courses via the Internet using *Blackboard*. A colleague and I taught our foundations of literacy course by combining our two sections and team teaching via cyberspace. A colleague set up a Yahoo discussion group for our department. This was invaluable for conducting departmental business as we made academic decisions on course offerings, and discussed which neighborhoods had power, which grocery stores were open, and which faculty could return, if they had a home, hotel, or FEMA trailer.

### **Listening to the experiences of evacuees**

While in Shreveport, I acquired knowledge about culturally and linguistically diverse learners by visiting local schools and a poverty-stricken urban neighborhood. I tried to learn all I could about evacuee experiences by visiting a shelter and engaging in conversations with evacuees in stores or other places around town. Because I was out in the community, I was also interviewed by journalists on such topics as the displacement of New Orleans artists, faith-based recovery efforts, and education pre-Katrina and post-Katrina.

From spring 2006 to 2007, my family lived primarily in a trailer provided by FEMA, located in front of our New Orleans home. As I drove to the UNO campus, I toured some of the devastated neighborhoods. It was very sobering to drive past schools and playgrounds that were deserted, though temporarily. Many local schools opened up at alternate or shared facilities through creative scheduling. Some opened “transitional” schools, combining students from several schools, until their original campuses were repaired and deemed safe for re-opening. Many children and their families are still displaced, adding to the cultural and linguistic diversity in our nation’s schools.

### **Principles for Educating Evacuee Learners**

What emerged from my Katrina experiences, conversations and reflections was a new interest in literacy education for displaced learners from natural disasters or forced migration. Such learners bring their own cultural and linguistic knowledge that may be quite different from their new communities and schools. I offer the following principles for educating diverse, displaced learners.

#### **(1) Language arts, media and technology**

The six communicative arts of *speaking, listening, reading, writing, visual representing* and *viewing* are invaluable in preparation for and recovery from natural or national disasters. Teaching literacy skills in isolation may assist learners in reading words or filling in blanks on applications for assistance, but will not necessarily

enhance either critical thinking or communicative abilities to prepare learners for life’s challenges in times of crisis. Learning to use multiple technologies is also invaluable for survival and recovery. Creative arts, creative play, and meaningful work all provide evacuees, especially children, with multiple means of expressing themselves as they cope with the aftermath of disaster (Frost, 2005). Multiple literacies empower the communication and education of all learners. Creative arts, media, technology, and language are necessary for survival in a post-Katrina world.

#### **(2) Culture and language explorations**

Evacuee learners from the Gulf States can enlighten their classmates around the country about their cultural and linguistic heritages. Evacuees are resources for exploring the rich celebrations, traditions, values, foods, dialects and languages found in local regions. Teachers can use class time so that these learners can voice their knowledge in related subject areas. Evacuees can share their expertise on disasters with classmates in other parts of the country. Children’s stories and more advanced literature on disasters can motivate students to write about their own experiences (Bedford & Brenner in MacGillivray, 2010).

Viewing films and TV broadcasts on disasters from other parts of the world (e.g., the earthquake in Haiti, the Southeast Asian tsunami, the war in Iraq) can lead to human compassion in a global context and to an awareness of other cultures. Dialect awareness tasks can also enhance cultural understanding and respect (Adger et al, 1999). As evacuees learn about the cultures and languages of their host regions, they can share their knowledge with classmates as they return home.

#### **(3) Culturally responsive critical literacy**

As local schools become more culturally diverse, literacy instruction must become more culturally responsive. Strategies that incorporate authentic texts and the voices of learners are especially powerful. In a post-Katrina society, citizens need to develop critical thinking and communication skills to prepare for and recover from future disasters. This should be part of our national agenda for health and safety education in preparing for disaster evacuation and recovery. Literacy instruction should not be limited solely to the teaching of isolated skills, alone.

Critical literacy goes beyond comprehending information. According to Lewison (2007), “critical literacy encourages students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power

relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can promote social justice.” In our experiences with Katrina, our critical literacy abilities were tested to the fullest as we used our language abilities to survive, recover and serve our communities.

#### (4) Respect for linguistic and cultural diversity

Katrina brought together diverse groups of people from different areas, classes and cultures. Population shifts occurred as relief workers with regional and international backgrounds moved into various local areas. We experienced diversity with workers and volunteers across linguistic, ethnic, religious and racial lines. Communication across cultures became necessary as people from various languages shared the same shelters or worked together as volunteers, supporting one another in solidarity as a step toward appreciating our multi-linguistic and multicultural society.

As evacuees were displaced around the country, they added to the diversity of school populations nationwide. Respecting linguistic and cultural variation is a first step toward enhancing mutual understanding. Negative attitudes (deficit theories) toward the language and culture of evacuees can negatively impact their learning and motivation.

Just as our nation’s schools accept immigrants from other lands, citizens displaced by national disasters must feel welcome in new educational settings around the country. As the 1883 words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty state:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

Many homeless citizens from New Orleans, tossed through the storm, are now in various school and non-school educational settings around our nation.

#### Concluding Remarks

This article articulates my reflections on language and literacy in the context of evacuation and recovery from just one disaster, Hurricane Katrina. It outlines elements that I believe are critical for education in a post-Katrina world. I encourage all of us in the language teaching profession to explore additional responses to the needs of learners affected by natural disasters.

Throughout much of my Katrina journey, the words of American educator John Dewey kept coming back to me. I shared this quote in my last university class prior to evacuation from Katrina:

“What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned, and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?” (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)

Natural disasters encourage us to reflect on our life experiences, on our personal values and on what is worthwhile. These reflections help shape our approaches to education and help us to survive the storms, tsunamis and earthquakes of life.

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*This article is based on a presentation by the author at TESOL 2011 in New Orleans and on his 2006 article “No Evacuee Left Behind” in the Journal of Reading Education.*

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#### John G. Barnitz

University of New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

E-mail: <jbarnitz@uno.edu>

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