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First, Do No Harm: Teaching Writing in the Wake of Traumatic Events



Sarah DeBacher and Deborah Harris-Moore

Abstract: Sarah DeBacher and Deborah Harris-Moore offer their experiences with teaching in the aftermath of traumatic situations. DeBacher, who taught at the University of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and Harris-Moore, who taught at UC Santa Barbara following a mass shooting, explore the difficulty of teaching writing in the wake of traumatic events.

"We live in the Age of Trauma," declared Charles Barber, Lecturer of Psychiatry at Yale Medical School in a 2013 article on *Salon*—an age when events like the terror attacks of 9/11, the nearly normalized shootings in public places, and cataclysmic natural disasters occur with a regularity and a closeness-to-home that means those of us unscathed by trauma are few and far between. Add to this an explosion of popular interest in trauma and its accompanying discourse—theories of trauma and recovery, trauma narratives, trigger warnings—and we find ourselves not just *living* in the age of trauma but teaching in it, and with very little guidance about how to do that well.

In her introduction to *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*, Marian Mersobian MacCurdy reminds us that while the work may look similar, "[t]eachers are not therapists . . . we listen to students, we actively participate in the process of the construction of a therapeutic narrative, we . . . care about them as people" (6). MacCurdy further argues that the writing process we guide students through "mirrors the therapeutic methodology for trauma survivors outlined in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*" (81). So, no, we are *not* therapists, but our work sometimes looks an awful lot like theirs. And in the context of trauma, that overlap can become, as the experiences we share here show, even more fraught.

Within our field, there is a growing body of scholarship about how to respond to the therapeutic or confessional narratives of our students who've been affected by trauma, and about how to integrate trauma discourse into the content of our writing courses (see Shane Borrowman, among others). In its 2008 manual for responding to trauma in children and adolescents, the American Psychological Association (APA) includes schools as a critical site for response to trauma-exposed children, adolescents, and families (3). However, there is not much that shines a light on what it means to teach when *both* teacher and student are traumatized. Scholars like Marilyn Valentino advise that we maintain a "professional distance" from our students. But what if that distance can't be kept? How should we teach in the midst of collective, widespread, and ongoing trauma, when we and all of our students are among the traumatized? One might go to the APA or to Herman's seminal text on trauma and recovery for advice, but would be faced with "noteworthy gaps in information" on "interventions for the early or acute phase of trauma recovery" (APA 6). In other words, even the trauma experts acknowledge they're not sure what's best to do when you're living—and teaching—in these gaps.

But these gaps are precisely where we found ourselves teaching writing. In 2005, Sarah DeBacher was beginning her first year as a full-time Instructor of English at the University of New Orleans (UNO) when the failure of the federal levees during Hurricane Katrina killed 1,800 New Orleanians and displaced tens of thousands of others. In 2014, Deborah Harris-Moore was teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) when Elliot Rodger murdered six UCSB students and injured fourteen others before turning his gun on himself.

There are differences in our individual experiences, but what we've come to discover in collaborating on this piece is the significance of what we have in common. For instance, in spite of our teaching after traumatic events that occurred nearly a decade apart and in terrifically different ways, we struggled with some of the same questions about

appropriate pedagogical approaches: Is it better to confront emotions and difficult topics in times of trauma, or to move forward with business? If we invite the topic of trauma into our classes, should we give students the ability to opt out of particular texts and assignments? If we do allow—or perhaps even encourage—students to express their feelings about recent events in lieu of a traditional assignment, how do we grade this nontraditional reflection? Our goal in this piece is to share our experiences teaching writing after a trauma in hopes that these stories can provide support to other teachers who have also wrestled with what to do while teaching writing in an “Age of Trauma,” and those who will undoubtedly be called upon to teach in the context of trauma in the future.

1. Sarah DeBacher and Hurricane Katrina

More than a decade ago, on October 10, 2005, my husband and I joined a few dozen of our colleagues in the parking lot of one of UNO’s suburban satellite campuses to hear the chancellor announce our triumphant return to business as usual on the eve of the beginning of the so-called “Katrina Semester.” It was, of course, anything but. Not only were most of the faculty and students unable to come home, we were also embarking on a very unusual endeavor: heading back to school in the midst of “the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country”—our then-mayor’s title for Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing failure of the federal levees. Enrollments had plummeted from a pre-storm high of just over 17,000 students to just over 6,500. In our First-Year Writing Program (FYWP), the 3,000-plus students who’d been enrolled in 163 pre-storm sections of composition were, like the faculty, scattered all over the region. 590 students enrolled in 38 sections of freshman composition during the abbreviated fall semester. Eighty percent of those sections were taught online, largely by faculty who had no experience with online teaching whatsoever.

Still, heading back to school was, at least initially, a welcome return to some semblance of normalcy. After six weeks of living in my parents’ basement and not knowing whether we had a home to return to, of learning of various losses—big ones, small ones—my husband and I were ready to be home, even if that home was dramatically different from what it had been. And as I walked into my classroom, I got goosebumps. It felt good to shed the new identities that had been attributed to me—evacuee, victim, survivor—and to embrace a more familiar role as teacher. I didn’t yet realize how unfamiliar, how at times absurd—even traumatizing—the act of teaching would be in a post-Katrina context.

Among the many struggles I faced as an instructor was the question of what to teach. Just before the semester began, the provost sent out an email soliciting storm narratives from the university community. These narratives would be stored in the Hurricane Katrina Archive and potentially published. As a result, the Katrina Narrative Essay became a popular first assignment amongst FYWP faculty, including me. Nearly immediately, I regretted assigning the topic. The essays my students wrote largely fell into two camps: either they were fragmented, messy affairs lacking in narrative control and a sense of purpose, or they were excessively formal and swimming with clichés. Certainly, the same problems surface in early drafts, regardless of the subject, but something else was up. Later, when I asked students to work on revisions, some of them rebelled. They didn’t want to write about Katrina anymore, they said. And I understood. They—we—were still very much in the midst of the trauma. The backdrop of our learning included regular power outages, nightly patrols by armed National Guardsmen, and more dead bodies found. It’s not hard to see how, in this context, it might be difficult to write anything well, much less a graded college essay.

My biggest teaching crisis that semester came when I faced the unavoidable: I would have to assign grades to my students’ writing, which just felt *wrong*. I found myself struggling to separate the writing from the writer, the text from the life. Certainly, we writing teachers face this challenge in ordinary circumstances, but suddenly I felt paralyzed by the task. Tangled up in a collective trauma, each “F” took on new meaning, both absurd and perhaps even cruel. My students struggled to meet learning outcomes. They—and I, for that matter—struggled simply to *show up*—a feat deserving of an “A,” I remember thinking. Inflated grades across the department that semester reflect that this struggle was not mine alone.

I soon found myself asking, “Who am I to make my students write about Katrina?” and “Who am I to cause them further potential harm in the form of a grade?” I think trauma theorists would say those are good questions. I think they’d also agree that I made some mistakes that semester—both in requiring students to write trauma narratives and in grading them. In *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* Peter Goggin and Maureen Daley Goggin write of the “stuttering struggle” of writing about trauma: “It is not until it is spoken/written that trauma is made present” (31). In other words, in assigning the subject of Katrina I was potentially subjecting my students to additional trauma through the telling. Moreover, as a victim of the same (or at least similar) trauma, I was in no position to read those narratives without injury, a requirement for those hearing trauma narratives outlined both by the Red Cross and by countless mental health professionals (see Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*). As important as avoiding personal injury is

avoiding re-injuring the narrative-teller through any form of judgment. But what are grades if not judgment?

Living as I do in an age of trauma and in a city where it's not a matter of *if* the next collective trauma will occur but *when*, I've thought a lot about what I might do differently the next time around. When it comes—the failure of the levees, a campus shooting, whatever it may be—I plan to keep the advice of Goggin and Daley Goggin in mind: “While it is crucial that we do not mandate writing trauma, it is equally crucial that we also do not silence it” (40). I plan to invite discussions about trauma discourse and narratives, to involve my students in discussions about whether they wish write them, and if so, to collaborate on establishing the criteria by which they'll be both empathetically and ethically evaluated. I plan to use contract grading and a healthy dose of empathy to create a safe space for students who choose to write about trauma. And I plan to come up with an approach that offers agency to my traumatized students and an opportunity to reflect. If those plans fail, I will, at the very least, realize that what we all might need most in the midst of a trauma is a goddamned break.

2. Deborah Harris-Moore and a Student Massacre

In Spring Quarter 2014, Elliot Rodger stabbed his two roommates and their visiting friend to death in their apartment located in Isla Vista, the student housing neighborhood next to UCSB, then shot and killed three students in the streets before killing himself. Many other students were injured, and many more were witnesses. For UCSB seniors, graduation was only two weeks away. In my case, it seemed impossible not to address an event so vivid and immediate, and there was no time to research trauma or prepare a thoughtful, related assignment.

As a teacher whose research is on the body and materialist rhetoric, I've often worried how to best deal with “traumatized” students so as to not alienate them or distress them with certain topics or texts. Yet the last two weeks of that quarter proved to be the biggest challenge for me. With students crying in class or absent altogether in the immediate aftermath, many instructors and students felt the need for open dialogue. Every instructor took a different approach, including those who chose to continue with their determined curriculum. Several Writing Program faculty, however, gave students the option to write about the event in lieu of planned final projects, and many students were grateful for the option.

At the time of the event, I was teaching Writing for the Visual Arts, and students were working on a major two-part project that would comprise their most significant grade percentage for the course. Many students were already in the drafting stage, but some hadn't started the project. After the event, students came to class in varying emotional states: some seemed fine and wanted to get back to work; others could barely function and were visibly distressed. As a teacher of writing, I thought of the students who would want or need a space to reflect and made a reflective essay an option to replace the final project. But I wondered whether to do more than just offer options. Could I turn the horrific murder of six students into an opportunity for critical reflection and learning? I was well aware of my lack of training and planning, but also realized the urgency of the situation. I realized, as Rachel N. Spear argues, “we may in/directly use our stories, our personal experiences to back up arguments connected to the literature and themes with which we are engaging while enhancing our writing and analytical skills” (72). Was there a way to offer a critical space for those students who wanted one and still protect those students who might be retriggered by certain texts?

What I discovered in reality was an overall resistance to discussing or writing about the event. There had already been an overwhelming amount of response to it: letters and a speech by Janet Napolitano (president of the University of California), public messages from the victims' parents, classes dedicated entirely to the murders, vigils, and even therapy dogs on campus. Students were already depressed and were continuously bombarded by reminders of what happened. In my response as a teacher and a scholar of rhetoric, I gave a speech about misogyny—Rodger had targeted sorority girls after feeling rejected by them—and how we had learned in Writing for the Visual Arts that art is a way to express anxieties productively. My sentiments were met with tired and sad stares. I gave the reflective essay option, and not a single student wrote one. I offered a relevant optional reading, and few bothered to read it. Even in a class in which I had warm and open rapport with the students, my efforts were useless. I was a teacher of writing and rhetoric who was facing a silent class.

It struck me that I was disappointed in their lack of reflection or expression. But after all, even I didn't want to be in class anymore that quarter. Yet I expected my students to have the same intellectual and critical distance that I mustered in order to teach. It makes sense that a writing instructor would want students to write, but what if the act of writing in the midst of mourning proves unproductive or, as Sarah suggests was the case for some of her students, even more traumatizing? Kathlyn Conway describes trying to write in the midst of serious or terminal illness: “Those who have been pushed to the limits of their ability to cope know the difficulty of describing to others what they have been through” (15). Moreover, Janice Carello and Lisa Butler argue that when trauma is not handled properly,

students can be retraumatized (155). In lieu of guidance or perhaps the ability to handle trauma and teaching “properly,” I have since realized that allowing for students to simply feel and sort through complicated emotions in silence is an equally powerful and productive option.

After the 2016 UCLA murder/suicide just more than a week before the end of spring quarter, *The Los Angeles Times* published an article on this very question of productivity: “Many students said they couldn’t imagine going back to ‘normal’ after what happened Wednesday” (Xia, Jennings, and Watanabe). While this event was not on the same scale as the Rodger murders, the reaction by police on campus was dramatic, and several students in the article describe shock and reticence in the face of required final assignments and exams. Even though our instinct is to teach, to rise above a horrible event, the immediate push to intellectualize or reflect on an event may be emotionally damaging and even paralyzing for some students. And the pressure for us to turn trauma into a lesson may not let us, the instructors, take time to grapple emotionally either.

While no teacher or student should have to go through a trauma like Hurricane Katrina or the Elliot Rodger murders, clearly events happen that are beyond our control. These events are also very situated and call for different responses. With no guidebook or instructions to follow, instructors are often left with their instincts and immediate resources. After reflecting on our unique but overlapping experiences, we don’t have any definitive answers to the challenge of how to teach after and amidst trauma. What’s clear to us both is that while we want very much to help our students, as writers, make sense of their worlds and lives through writing, we also want them to have some choice in how they go about it. And while silence may be an option for them, we writing teachers have an obligation to understand and discuss how—and perhaps even *if and when*—to teach in traumatic contexts.

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