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# Selected Distance Education Disaster Planning Lessons Learned From Hurricane Katrina

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## **Abstract**

This paper details one institution's experience developing post disaster online instructional capability without access to the institution's courseware platform and help desk services. In turn, the post disaster distance education lessons learned include the possible need for all institutions to: prearrange an interruption of service agreement with courseware providers for emergency alternative platform capability; add simple course site administrator instructions to the mandated/recommended training for online instructors; evaluate the need for decentralizing courseware platform administration capabilities; and remind online instructors to keep (and/or evacuate with) copies of any teaching materials they would need to recreate their e-learning course sites.

## **Introduction**

There is an old English fairy tale entitled “Lazy Jack” that tells the story of a young man who was so lazy he only agreed to work when his mother threatened to throw him out of the home they shared. Yet, accordingly to the story, even though Jack began to labor for pay, each day he worked and received pay, he was too lazy (and/or unintelligent) to think about the definitive way to safely carry the type of wage payments he received home. Further, Jack only used the most recent advice he received for how to best carry his wages home and accordingly, since each day he worked he was paid with a different type of wage, Jack ruined each new wage item by applying the wrong lesson learned from the day before.

With the story of “Lazy Jack” as a cautionary tale of the limited applicability of past lessons from Hurricane Katrina to future disaster scenarios and planning, this discussion details how University College (the continuing education academic unit at Tulane University that has since been renamed the School of Continuing Studies) utilized a temporary loaner courseware platform to offer online courses during a post disaster mini fall semester. In particular, the experience of developing an online instructional capability without the usual computer systems and help desk services is used to detail the lessons learned that other distance learning academic units may consider when disaster planning.

## *Timeline of a Natural Disaster*

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005 , or two days prior to the scheduled start of the fall semester at Tulane University. As part of pre hurricane preparations,

Tulane University (with their main campus in New Orleans ) shut down all of their systems including their e-mail, web site, and Blackboard courseware platform systems.

After Hurricane Katrina made landfall, a number of the New Orleans levees broke and a majority of the city flooded. In turn, even though the main Uptown campus could have been repaired in time to salvage the fall 2005 semester, owing to the damage from the storm to the infrastructure of the city, Tulane University administrators made an announcement on September 2nd to cancel the regular fall semester on the main campus.

At the same time that the main campus would not be open during the balance of the fall 2005 semester, it was determined that two of the satellite campuses used by Tulane's continuing education academic unit, University College, were only minimally damaged. Further, the two minimally damaged satellite campuses—the Elmwood Campus in Harahan, Louisiana and the Biloxi Campus in Biloxi, Mississippi —were in areas of the region that enjoyed a comparatively quick economic rebound.

Still, while each of the satellite campuses cited above were fully functional during the period of time being considered for University College's mini fall semester, Tulane's centralized help desk service (for both students and instructors) was not available and Tulane's Blackboard system was only brought back online for instructors to use to retrieve teaching materials.

#### Timeline for Picking-Up the Distant Learning Pieces Post Katrina

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| August 29, 2005    | Hurricane Katrina makes landfall on the Gulf coast.  |
| September 2, 2005  | The regular fall semester at Tulane University is cancelled.   |
| September 9, 2005  | After the Elmwood and Biloxi campuses were inspected and deemed safe, discussions on the possibility of holding a mini fall semester (including both face-to-face and online courses) began.   |
| September 13, 2005 | With the number of both full-time and part-time faculty members interested in continuing to teach online and the Tulane Blackboard system off line, Blackboard, Inc. created an alternative platform space for Tulane as part of their Katrina Relief initiative for all the impacted Gulf Coast institutions. |

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| September 23, 2005 | University College 's mini fall semester course schedule was posted and students began registering.  |
| October 24, 2005   | University College 's mini fall semester began and owing to the large number of students still displaced, the 11 online courses that were offered were in high demand. |

## **Re-Building an Online Capability**

### *Finding a Courseware Platform*

Given the finding that Tulane's Blackboard server would not be available for student use during the fall semester, it was clear that an alternative course management platform had to be located before online courses could be offered during the planned mini fall semester. Still, an inquiry into alternative systems (like the open source platform Sakai) was never fully investigated since it was quickly discovered that Blackboard, Inc. was making alternative Blackboard environments available to all Gulf Coast institutions impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Accordingly, as part of their Katrina Relief efforts to the entire region, Blackboard, Inc. offered to provide Tulane with an alternative course management system platform.

In addition, Blackboard assembled a site with tutorial materials (for faculty members), discussion forums, and a means for linking up Gulf Coast faculty and staff with individuals in different institutions that volunteered to provide mentoring help.

Still, given the lack of expertise in the available instructional and administrative staff as well as the tight schedule for bringing the alternative courseware platform online, it was never determined whether the loaner space could have been linked to the Tulane e-mail system that was the first system to be brought back online for full use (or alternatively, to a different e-mail server). Instead, faculty members and students were instructed to self-register with a preferred e-mail address that was then used to create new user IDs for each mini semester registrant.

### *Getting in Touch with Students*

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Tulane had established an emergency information telephone number and web site. In turn, the alternative, emergency web site was utilized (through individually developed sub-web pages) by all the different academic units at Tulane, including University College, to maintain contact with students. Again, University College 's satellite campuses sustained minimal damage and resumed limited normal operations—including answering telephone inquiries--during the month of September.

The specific communication functions accomplished through the emergency alternative University College web site included a request for all students to forward current contact information, how to get in touch with the College, what courses would be offered during the mini fall semester, how to register for the mini fall semester, etc.

Still, in the early days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, Tulane's e-mail was not back online and it was necessary to compile manual lists of students' alternative e-mail addresses and other contact information. Further, while the regular Tulane Blackboard system only uses student (and faculty) Tulane.edu e-mail addresses, the loaner Blackboard space allowed students to specify an alternative e-mail address. However, since the loaner Blackboard system was not linked to an e-mail server, instructors could not send out e-messages through their course sites. Instructors did have access to the alternative e-mail addresses students had specified when registering for mini semester classes.

In addition to the use of the emergency web site, individual students and program administrators utilized list serves and blogs to communicate with students and faculty members.

### *The Online Courses Offered*

Looking specifically at the online courses to be taught during the mini fall semester, only previously developed asynchronous online courses were considered to be candidates for the abbreviated salvaged fall semester. First, a large enough selection of previously developed online courses (and accompanying instructors) was available to fill up the mini semester schedule. Second, given the limited time available for both the development and execution (the salvaged mini fall semester would utilize the same six-week schedule used for summer school classes), it did not seem likely that faculty normally teaching exclusively in a face-to-face setting would be able to convert their courses to an online format in the time available.

### *Rebuilding Instructor Course Sites from Scratch*

Although the loaner courseware platform space enabled University College to offer online courses during the mini fall semester, it was the responsibility of the individual instructors to re-build their courses from scratch. Tulane's regular Blackboard platform was eventually brought back online for the sole purpose of instructors being able to retrieve teaching materials (but was not supported through new course creation or with student login help that would enable using the system for course delivery).

### *Platform Administration*

During a normal semester, University College has access to about 12 individuals in the instructional technology/media/web specialist areas plus the technology support group. In contrast, the set-up and administration of the loaner courseware platform was managed by an experienced online instructor and a technology savvy program administrator. The specific platform administration tasks to be managed included the following items.

- Setting up the system-wide appearance of the platform (including graphics).
- Creating course sites for faculty members teaching online or for use as a companion site for face-to-face courses.
- Creating user IDs (and passwords) for all of the students, faculty, and staff members that needed access to the platform.

## *Operating Without a Help Desk*

All faculty and staff members at the college received an e-message with instructions on how to create user IDs and respond to other platform-related questions. Also, the same e-message explained how in the absence of our central help desk, everyone's help was essential to the success of the mini semester online program.

### **Lessons Learned**

The experience of developing an alternative courseware environment and subsequently offering online courses without administrative and help desk support provided numerous lessons for all institutions to consider in advance of being subjected to a disruption of normal campus functions. More specifically, the lessons learned include the following.

- Consider prearranging an interruption of service agreement with your courseware platform provider that will provide your institution with alternative platform courseware and server space. Blackboard, Inc. anticipated this need and provided all the institutions in the Gulf Coast region that were impacted by Hurricane Katrina with an alternative Blackboard environment. However, other institutions impacted by smaller scale disasters may not automatically be offered similar alternative platform courseware and server space.
- As an alternative to the notion of prearranging an interruption of service agreement with an institution's commercial courseware provider, interested institutions could pool their resources in a Sakai-like partnership of resources and know-how to develop a safety net for dealing with any type of interruption in the delivery of online learning opportunities at individual or multiple institutions.
- While not having access to platform-based e-mail turned out to be inconvenient but not critical to the development and delivery of online courses, if possible (as part of an interruption of service agreement) having access to an e-mail function within each course site would contribute to the effective delivery of post disaster online courses.
- Include simple course site administrator functions in the mandated/recommended training for all online instructors. For example, online instructors need to know how to: create a user ID for a student; enroll students in a course site; remove students from a course site; and, change student passwords. In this way, if administrative and/or help desk support is compromised in the wake of a disaster, online instructors can assist with some of the administrative aspects of keeping their course site current.
- Evaluate the need for decentralized courseware platform administration capabilities on an individual academic unit basis. That is, even if courseware platform support is centrally provided, identifying and training [redundant] faculty and staff members to administer a system is critical to effective disaster planning. Alternatively, if a decentralized courseware platform administration capability is not feasible or desirable, in a disaster scenario the centralized courseware platform administration functions need to be provided as a minimum safety-net feature. Similarly, if inexperienced (in terms of e-learning) faculty members will be asked to convert their face-to-face courses to online courses, instructional technology help needs to be provided as a minimum safety-net feature.

- Remind online instructors to keep (and/or evacuate with) copies of any teaching materials they would need to recreate their course sites.
- In the same way that redundant platform administration capability is needed, redundant web site development capability is needed. That is, the re-creation of an alternative web site for the continuing education academic unit was critical to University College 's ability to communicate with displaced students, faculty, and staff.

### **The End Product and Need for Additional Planning**

Thanks to the Katrina Relief provided by Blackboard, Inc., the mentoring support offered by institutions around the country, the often Herculean efforts of faculty and staff, and the spirit of cooperation and service of everyone connected with University College and Tulane University, University College successfully recreated and delivered 11 online courses post Katrina. Further, the online courses offerings were particularly popular with students since so many were still displaced in the weeks and months following the storm.

The most surprising aspect of the successful delivery of the online courses included how only a small number of help desk type questions were ultimately forwarded to the two individuals serving as temporary administrators for the loaner platform both before and during the 6-week post disaster semester. In turn, the likely explanation for the lower than expected computer help requests includes either or both of the following: (1) the first line help provided by faculty and staff heeding the call to assist with help desk functions was effective; and (2) only experienced online learners self-selected themselves to take online courses during the recovery semester.

At the same time that the help desk functions were surprisingly unburdensome, the creation of new user IDs for all platform users proved to be quite burdensome for the temporary platform administrators. A uniform naming convention was established and communicated to all faculty and staff (with the aim of spreading out the work load associated with the identity creations). However, as a practical matter (and with limited staff and time resources), the bulk of this work effort was accomplished by one person who lost count after the creation of more than 500 user identities.

Finally, in the spirit of the a “Lazy Jack” caution against applying irrelevant lessons learned, it is worth repeating that only experienced online instructors taught during the mini post Katrina session. Accordingly, additional planning and delivery resources need to be applied to a scenario where faculty members that are inexperienced with the online delivery of their courses would be called upon to teach online.

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### **Reference**

Steel, F. A. (1918) English Fairy Tales. Retrieved September 20, 2006 from The Baldwin Project web site at: [www.mainlesson.com](http://www.mainlesson.com).