Using “When the Levees Broke/Teaching the Levees” to Teach Middle School Students About Empathy and Social Justice

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This action research study reports on an important unit of study having evidence of success. The paper discusses how students in a social studies classroom setting may be encouraged to develop and display empathy for individuals who are impacted by hurricane disasters. It uses aspects of the documentary “When the Levees Broke” in collaboration with the “Teaching the Levees Module” and several technology based classroom resources. The findings indicate that as students contextualized the impact of Hurricane Katrina and similar natural disasters on human populations they begin to develop and display empathy. The students who were involved in this investigation also were able to apply principles of social justice which facilitated reflective thinking as they used hindsight to analyze and discuss the context of this natural disaster.

Key Words: Empathy, Hurricane, Katrina, Levees, Social Justice, Technology

Introduction

During the Fall of 2007, the action researcher received a teaching manual from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) entitled “Teaching the Levees.” This manual came with a set of two DVDs entitled “When the levees broke,” a Spike Lee production. I used aspects of the modules and the DVDs with my college level pre-service teachers with much success, becoming curious about how middle school students would respond to some of the contents and the materials presented in these modules. The researcher wanted to carry out the experiment in such a way, however, as to shield them from some of the graphic images that were presented on the DVDs. The researcher operates an after school geography club in a Kindergarten - 8 school, so there was availability of students to whom she could teach the material.

The primary goal of the after school geography club is to facilitate geographic literacy through students’ exposure to a plethora of materials and activities in human, social, physical, environmental, and cultural geography, as well as geographical information systems. The researcher investigated whether exposing students to the content and materials covered in “Teaching the Levees” would complement the geography club’s goal, and expand the activities of the club to a level of encouraging students to establish connections between academic geography and an event that occurred in recent history. It was hoped that, during the teaching of this module, participating would begin to contextualize their emotional responses to the impact of Hurricane Katrina and other similar natural disasters. This contextualization process might then be the basis for a formal introduction to notions of empathy and social justice in social studies.

Using the “Teaching the Levees” modules also allowed students in the geography club to media multi-task, a process by which an individual engages in the use of more than one media at a time, for example texting while...
watching television, this method is recommended by Gary Stiler’s (2007, p. 20) who suggested that it is appropriate for educators to utilize technology in the classroom. While learning this module, the students watched the Spike Lee documentary about Hurricane Katrina, as well as the YouTube music videos about similar natural disasters that have occurred around the globe. They also used Google Earth to locate the places mentioned in the documentary and music videos. Incorporating technology into the classroom could serve to enhance the learning experiences of these students because in some instances, technology based pedagogies may be more effective than traditional teacher-centered pedagogy (James Gee, 2003; Walter Minkel, 2002). The students also used basic Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to map the locations of places they perceived to have similar (hurricane) disaster risks, and they discussed their rationales for making such assumptions. The students’ media multitasking also involved the use of pictures and stories, which according to Zdrayko Marjanovic, (2006) may be used to assess empathy in children.

While multitasking is associated traditionally with the busy adult who attempts to complete multiple tasks simultaneously, Ulla Foehr, (2006) suggests, “Much of the multitasking among young people revolves around media use” (p.1). It was observed, however, that students could only concentrate meaningfully on a limited number of media, therefore, the students were asked to focus on two media at a time. In most instances the students were asked to use the information that they gained from the television documentary or the music videos to inform the activities they were working on, using other media. For Foehr (2006) there is some agreement among researchers that when two channels are semantically consistent, users can attend to, process, and recall information with ease (p. 4). The students, therefore, were able to effectively “juggle multiple activities, use time efficiently, and use existing technologies in a creative way” (Foehr, 2006, p. 5).

Teaching about the breaking of the levees and the other impacts of Hurricane Katrina is relevant and important because such lessons teach students empathy, social justice and ethics, while reinforcing their basic geographical knowledge of space, place, location, and human environment interaction. “Natural disasters tend to carry a mystical, supernatural air that captivates onlookers and are able to immediately conjure up major social tragedies” (Stephanie Feitelberg, 2007, p. 1). This is an apt description of the students’ initial response to the documentary. According to Gavin Fairbairn (2002), “Interacting with stories that are real, or true, before we encounter situations like them in the world can be a good way of ‘limbering up’ for the real thing” (p.22). The lessons could allow students to be prepared for the possibilities of encountering a natural disaster despite the fact that only a small percentage of the population may actually experience a natural disaster in their lifetimes. The documentary “When the Levees Broke” presented students with real stories, which

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according to Fairbairn (2002) are narratives that are often referred to as case studies, and are within the tradition of storytelling. The real stories in “When the levees broke” documented the experiences of ordinary individuals with whom the students in the geography club could easily identify. While the core of the activities to which the students were exposed focused on Hurricane Katrina, they were given the opportunity to learn about similar natural disasters in other parts of the world, such as Hurricanes Gilbert and Ivan in Jamaica, and Cyclone (Hurricane) Nargis in Myanmar. This focus was aimed at providing students with a global perspective on the topic. It is important to note that the “Teaching the Levees” approach may be used in other countries, especially those prone to hurricane disasters. Despite this, there is no published research that discusses the use of this documentary or approach outside of the United States.

As an instructional strategy, the use of technology allowed participating students to recognize the immediacy of the materials to which they were being exposed. The graphic nature of some images and narratives by many individuals who experienced this natural disaster allows the students to vicariously experience and express their understanding of the circumstances relevant to this and similar natural disasters. Such teaching approaches correspond with the goals of social studies, which encourages effective citizenship as it. The approach used in the “Teaching the levees” modules, may be applied to social studies lessons about other disasters such as earthquakes, flooding, and tornadoes. The applicability of this module’s approach is reflected in many of the lessons posted on the lesson plan page website, National Geographic Xpeditions pages, and publications by Ilene Berson and Jennifer Baggerly (2009). All these approaches to teaching about the impact of various natural disasters have one characteristic in common, they value the merits of using authentic human experiences with various disasters as these provide a basis for social studies classroom discussions, activities, and actions. The immediate implication of such an approach provides opportunities for the students’ learning to be true to life, relevant, and applicable to present and future experiences. Such learning experiences foster students’ caring feelings, empathy, and awareness that victims of all disasters deserve the same consideration when their pre- and post-disaster circumstances are assessed. The United Nations (2006) reported 360 natural disasters in 2005. Of this number, there were 27 named Atlantic tropical storms, 15 of which intensified to become Atlantic hurricanes, with seven of these 15 storms making landfall in the United States in that year (National Climatic Data Center, 2006). Despite these figures, Adele Brokin (2005) argues “Natural disasters are rare and that there is little chance many of the students’ home towns would be affected by a similar disaster” (p. 11). This point was given much emphasis during the discussions with the students. Notwithstanding, Marjanovic (2006) argues that with population growth globally, people are increasingly susceptible to natural disasters, particularly the poor who are often drawn to marginal lands that carry greater susceptibility. This increased susceptibility coupled with advancements in technology has resulted in intensified public exposure to the occurrence, and often the disastrous, impact of natural disasters globally. Such exposure predominantly solicits an emotional response. When appropriately channeled, such emotional responses may be contextualized to encourage empathy and social justice principles. This latter point embodies the key rationale for presenting the “Teaching the Levees” module to the students participating in the geography club. Empathy is a logical antecedent of helping behavior; it is the capacity for emotional identification with a feeling target (Marjanovic, 2006, p. 4). The geography club students were encouraged to show an awareness of the victims’ perspectives and to make
associations that allowed them to have negative, positive, and or neutral experiences during the teaching exercise.

Dear Dr. Mackie:

People struggled in New Orleans to survive, people lost their lives because of hurricane Katrina. Even today people are still trying to rebuild their lives, what can I do to help? I really feel sorry for them.

Sincerely,
Michael

Dear Calvin Mackie:

I saw you in the movie when the levees broke. I feel that you are truly remarkable. I could not begin to understand what people were going through in Louisiana. The lives that were lost, the buildings destroyed. You are a hero.

Sincerely,
Austin

“Teaching about the breaking of the levees and the other impacts of Hurricane Katrina is relevant and important because such lessons teach students empathy, social justice and ethics, while reinforcing their basic geographical knowledge of space, place, location, and human environment interaction.”

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical context for this action research study is using geography lessons to teach students empathy and social justice in social studies. The key purpose of social studies is to expose students to an integrated study of people, places, the past, present, future, interactions, and decisions making; aimed at improving their civic competence. Empathy and students’ conceptualization and displays of empathy are fundamental to any social studies classroom, because they provides students with the opportunity to personalize their historical, geographical, and social understanding of broader processes and events that shape their lives. Such understandings facilitate what Suzi Gablik (1995) refers to as “empathic social interaction.” This social interaction is what helps young students to grow into effective citizens: the primary aim of any social studies teaching. An important outgrowth of teaching empathy in the classroom is students’ awareness of the various principles of social justice. This action research study investigated whether teaching students about the impact of Hurricane Katrina encouraged them to develop and display empathy for the victims and the circumstances surrounding this disaster. The “Teaching the Levees” module was taught using an integrated approach. Though the core subject was geography, many of the activities students completed were language arts based (poetry and letter writing), and art based (cartoon analysis, creating pictures to depict their moods and the emotions they were feeling and creating sympathy cards). The focus of these activities was to measure, evaluate, and give students the opportunity to express the emotions they were feeling for the persons who had been adversely affected by Hurricane Katrina. The facilitation of higher-order thinking skills, such as problem solving and critical thinking among the students who participated was an instructional focus. These skills predominantly are devel-
oped using a constructivist approach, using goal-based and problem-solving scenarios (Cheolil Lim & Eunkyoung Yeon, 2009). The instructional design of this unit accommodated reflection among the students because the use of technology in collaboration with group discussions, allowed the students to reflect on their learning, and their changing perspectives about the materials they were exposed to. As the students gained a full picture of not only Hurricane Katrina, but the circumstances surrounding this and similar hurricane disasters, their reflective discussions indicated how much their perspectives changed. Such changed perspectives are important because it allowed them to think critically within the realms of social studies, which in turn strengthened their civic competence; one of the primary goals of social studies.

Empathy was explored as an important theme during the teaching of the unit. This allowed the study to develop using a “democratic and transformative approach, which gave a voice to the students who participated” (Foster 2007, p. 14). Carol Jeffers (2009) noted that “The capacity for empathy is important to the human community and the classroom provides a unique environment in which this capacity can be developed” (p 13). The empathy the geography club students expressed was a product of their value systems, which Jeffers (2009) sees as a means of facilitating the students’ understanding of the pluralistic world and their place within it. For Fairbain (2002,) “The ability to empathize is an indicator of our humanity,” (p. 28). This humanity is often confused with sympathy which is an emotional response. Empathy on the other hand, may be applied to a range of emotions including happiness, sadness, excitement, or sorrow.

The study of history can “Encourage students to contemplate intimately the thoughts and beliefs of people in the past to understand and appreciate their circumstances” (Foster, 1999, p. 18). The use of empathy in the teaching of historical events, similar to the impact of a natural disaster on a group of individuals, can encourage students to respond with less judgment and more empathy as they peruse the circumstances that surround the events.

**Research Methods**

How do multimedia based lessons about a recent natural disaster in the United States may be used to teach middle school aged students about empathy and social justice in social studies is the main research question. The research consisted of lessons about Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans. Finally, the qualitative data collected were analyzed and interpreted to address the research question. The data collected included samples of students’ works (creative writings, art pieces, and mapping exercises), and students’ discussions during the lessons. An observation check list was used to evaluate the students work to identify the extent to which they display empathy in their work. The debriefing discussions which were done at the end of each lesson were tape recorded; the questions from these discussions are presented in the Appendix. The students participated in a group interview on the last day of the unit, this was also tape recorded. The audio taped debriefing sessions and interviews were transcribed and coded based on how statements made by the students corresponded with the major questions and themes that emerged. These major questions and themes focused on how the students’ discussions and answers to questions showed empathy and the various principles of social justice.

**Context**

The action research study was conducted at a Kindergarten - 8 suburban (Southfield) school in metropolitan Detroit. The school opened in September of 2007 and accommodates 401 students. Students participating in this section of the geography club were primar-
ily from middle income and upper low income families. Approximately 19.2% (N= 5) students lived outside of the city of Southfield. This study was conducted during section one of the winter 2009 term after school geography club meetings during a four-week period in which the group met twice per week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) for 50 minutes each day. Twenty-six students participated, 11 girls and 15 boys. All of the participating students were African American; a reflection of the school’s student and faculty population which is more than 85% African American. The participants were of mixed academic abilities, including one student with a learning disability, requiring continuous assistance. Eleven of the participants were from the sixth grade (N = 6 females and N = 5 males), three were seventh graders (N = 3 males) and 12 were eighth graders (N = 5 females and N = 7 males). All the students who participated in the geography club activities were between 12 and 14 years old. The sample was self-selected since all the students volunteered to attend the geography club after school program by signing up for it.

**Program Description**

The program met the following national geographic standards, Michigan grade level content expectations (GLCEs), and national language arts standards:

1. Geography Standard 1. How to use maps and other geographic representations and report information from a spatial perspective.

2. Geography Standard 4. The physical and human characteristics of places.

3. Geography Standard 7: The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth’s surface. Grade Level Content expectation- Michigan (GLCE) 5.1: The meaning of citizenship.

4. Language Arts Standard 2: Using the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

5. Language Arts Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

**Week 1: Tuesday and Thursday**

The students were introduced to the concepts of disasters, hazards, and hurricanes, and to the fact of Hurricane Katrina to activate their prior knowledge. They were then shown the DVD (When the Levees Broke): Act I, chapter one (Miss New Orleans) and chapter two (God’s will). The students then logged onto Google Earth, located New Orleans, and talked about why they thought this area was affected by the hurricane. They discussed the vulnerability of this area to hurricanes and compared it to living in Michigan and its’ vulnerability to ice and snow storms to answer the question of “Why do these people continue to live in this area?” They continued watching the DVD: Part I, Act I, chapter three (Explosions) and two British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) simulations demonstrating how hurricanes form and the impacts they can have depending on their strength, and the general path that Hurricane Katrina took. Finally, the students were asked to use Google Earth to create a labeled map of the path taken by Hurricane Katrina.

**Week 2: Tuesday and Thursday**

The students watched the DVD: Part two, Act III, chapter one (By way of Katrina), chapter three (American citizen), and chapter four (The roots run deep). They then discussed the definitions of a citizen versus a refugee and the extent to which the displaced people from New Orleans were justified when they became upset about being called refugees. The students used Google Earth to locate some of the countries discussed as having large numbers of
refugees. Students were given a disaster scenario to analyze.

Week 3: Tuesday and Thursday

The students were introduced to four principles of social justice (equality, access, participation, and rights) and asked to describe how they thought these principles relate to the DVDs they had been watching in previous sessions. They then watched the DVD: Part II, Act III, chapter one, which focused on the dispersal of the Katrina victims. A debriefing discussion followed and students completed flow maps on the dispersal of Katrina victims to selected example states.

Week 4: Tuesday and Thursday

Each student was given a different political cartoon about Hurricane Katrina and its impact. They analyzed the cartoon and wrote a poem/rap about it. The poem/rap was presented and students explained their interpretation of the cartoon to the group. Next, students watched and analyzed music videos that reflected the impacts of hurricanes in different areas of the world: Jamaican - relating to Hurricane Gilbert, Myanmar – Cyclone Nargis, and New Orleans - Hurricane Katrina. The students were asked to focus on the emotions portrayed in the songs, and what they might imply about the singers' and communities' responses to those hurricanes. They were then asked to either draw a political cartoon about something they thought personally affected them, or they could think of a moment from their own lives in which they felt fear at first, but then felt hope (similar to the feelings of hurricane victims).

Week 5: Thursday: Interview Students

Findings and Discussion

Students’ Displays of Empathy and Awareness of Social Justice

The findings from this action research investigation indicated that most of the students displayed empathy with the victims of Hurricane Katrina and other disasters during the presentation of this module. As displayed in Table 1, all of the students made tangible connections between the documentary and the music videos they watched and their personal perceptions of the impact of hurricanes as natural disasters. The instrument (the observation checklist, the points from which are represented in table 1) was designed to evaluate the extent to which students displayed empathy during their discussions and while completing the activities they were assigned. It also evaluated the extent to which the students applied the principles of social justice discussed in the after school geography club to the activities they completed. Therefore, the instrument was used as a checklist, during all the discussion; even before the social justice principles were introduced. Additionally, all the activities completed were individually evaluated for evidence of empathy and the social justice principles as represented in table 1. The students displayed a good understanding of the various elements of social justice and their relevance to the module under study according to evidence obtained from the poems, and art work they produced and their debriefing conversations. The students were reflective especially in their discussions about Hurricane Katrina victims’ access to evacuation facilities, safe places to live immediately after the hurricane passed and access to food and clean water after the hurricane. According to Fairbairn (2002, p. 31) “discussions of the various aspects of social justice facilitated reflective learning among the students.”
Table 1: Rubric for evaluating the students’ display of empathy (using descriptive words, phrases, or drawings) and social justice in their work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation items</th>
<th>Students Display empathy</th>
<th>Mention and or illustrate the following:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide accurate descriptions of the characteristics and types of hurricanes</td>
<td>88.46% (N=23)</td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide accurate discussion on where and when hurricanes are formed</td>
<td>100% (N=26)</td>
<td>Access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use examples from the DVDs shown to aid the explanation of:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. how hurricanes are formed</td>
<td>100% (N=26)</td>
<td>Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. why all of the US is not vulnerable to hurricanes</td>
<td>80.76% (N=21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. how people should prepare for hurricanes</td>
<td>69.20% (N=18)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi. the impact of Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>100% (N=26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Compare and contrast the impact of Hurricane Katrina to other hurricanes</td>
<td>96.15% (N=25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Make tangible connections between their definitions, conversations, discussions, and the DVDs and or music videos they watched</td>
<td>100% (N=26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Show evidence of the following in their creative pieces</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Content comprehension/ and its relevance to the unit and daily life</td>
<td>96.15% (N=25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Concern for people impacted by and vulnerable to hurricanes</td>
<td>100% (N=26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Reflection on their learning/ how their learning relates to their life</td>
<td>84.61% (N=22)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that about half way through the unit during a debriefing discussion the students all indicated that the scenes from the “When the Levees Broke” documentary, and the music videos, which depicted human suffering, were the ones that resonated with them the most. An example of a comment giving such an indication was the following. When I saw the DVDs I started to think how grateful I was to not be getting hit by these hurricanes” (Sixth grade boy). This comment indicated the students’ reflective learning as well as their learning that shape how they think about and perceive human suffering. This discussion also demonstrated that the students understood that “natural disasters are rare and there is little chance that these students may be affected by a similar disaster” (Brodkin, 2005, p. 11). The discussions also explored the natural disasters to which Michigan is prone. During some of the discussions, the students contrasted how they would respond in the event of an ice or snowstorm. They also talked about how they would feel if they were victims of a natural disaster such as a tornado. The students also talked about how they would feel if they were the victims and others made comments that showed they were not sympathetic or empathetic. Such discussions were important because they helped the students to acknowledge that people often do not deliberately expose themselves to the
adverse effects of natural disasters. It was at this point that the students were able to spontaneously differentiate between the terms “natural disasters” and “natural hazards”, by acknowledging that the human component is critical.

The students’ display of empathy was evident as they watched the music videos. They were told that the music videos about Myanmar and Jamaica used different languages and dialects, and therefore they needed to use visual and auditory cues, such as facial expressions, vocal tones, and music beats to determine the emotions behind the songs. These music videos were specifically chosen to emphasize the point that despite linguistic and cultural differences, human emotions are universal. Students responded to the Jamaican music video with confusion, all noting that the upbeat melody of the song gave the impression that the singer was happy the island had been impacted by Hurricane Gilbert. Later, they discussed why they thought the singer may be happy because he survived the storm. Several of the students noted that the happy tone of the song may have been sarcasm, as a means of mocking the storm, rather than dwelling on its negative impacts. The students responded positively to what they interpreted as the hopeful message portrayed in the music video about Myanmar. According to one student, the song expressed “sadness over the adversity, but also hope for moving on with their lives;” several of the other students nodded in agreement to this statement. Another student noted that the hope reflected in the music video inspired him to create an art piece that showed how people cope with hurricane disasters and how they can continue their lives at the end of the disaster, rather than a piece that reflects the negative impacts of hurricanes.

According to Brodkin (2005), “reports of natural disasters can spark an excessive fear for safety” (p. 11), according one sixth grade boy “as I watched I kept fearing that some of the people would die”. This was the emotional response the program tried to avoid. The debriefing discussions attempted to move students beyond this emotional response to discussions reflecting hindsight instead of sympathy, and an awareness of the circumstances surrounding the event in its entirety. Given that the group consisted of younger children, however, emotional responses were accommodated. Social empathy can incite volunteer actions, the need to assist the people that are empathized with (see bullet three, table 1).

This certainly was the case with the students: “As I watched, I kept thinking how we can do something to help these people, instead of just sitting around watching this, how can we help them, help to provide them a home, some clothes, some food.” (Eighth grade boy).

When one woman said she said to her daughter, if we get caught in the water, swim and leave me, because she can swim and I cannot... (sigh) that made me feel so bad, because I kept thinking about my mom, I could never leave her, especially if I was afraid she would drown… It was so sad that they had to go through that, I still wonder why they had to go through that, why was there no one there to help them, to make sure they were safe from the hurricane and the water, it made me want to cry (Sixth grade girl).

“I felt grief, horrible because so many people left everything in their homes, their things, things that they worked hard for were destroyed in the hurricane, I just feel like something could have been done to protect these people (8th grade boy).”
Students’ questions regarding why the victims of Hurricane Katrina had no help was a reflection of students’ understanding of the three fundamental components of social justice (equality, access, and participation). Here, a sixth grade student asks questions, which Fairbairn (2002) sees as the realm of moral dilemmas, questions that could make an audience uncomfortable or feel threatened. The students immediately questioned and tried to explain, the divide between the impact of Hurricane Katrina, and the aid provided. They explored issues related to access - to evacuation facilities, to hurricane shelters, to aid during the post Katrina efforts – and they also explored participation in terms of the role of the victims and other individuals involved in the story. Many of their conclusions suggested that they remained convinced that social injustice had taken place, despite their understanding of what social justice entails (see bullet four sub bullet ii in Table 1). Examination of the results shown in Table 1, in collaboration with the quotes and students’ discussions, indicate that the instructional goal was achieved, and there was an acceptable reflection of empathy and social justice among the geography club students.

The students showed empathy when, for example, during a debriefing discussion one eight grade boy commented:

“The scene that showed signs and writings on walls and doors that said dead bodies inside, really made me stop and think. They were hoping for someone to see them (the dead bodies) so that they could be buried, it made me feel that God was helping me more than anybody else, because their life ended and I still have my life.”

This comment reflects the boy’s value system; he was examining the context of this scene and not just imaging himself living through this disaster. Such reflective statements are important because they suggest that the students were becoming more cognizant of the holistic picture with which they were presented, and that their responses were the product of deep thinking. The statements confirm Fairbairn’s (2002) notions of empathy, facilitating humanity among individuals. It also suggests that this student might become a more effective citizen, as the decisions he may make in the future about disaster victims could be more thoughtful and introspective. When the geography club students initially began watching the documentary, they repeatedly asked, “Why didn’t these people evacuate?” “But, they knew that their area was prone to hurricanes it was their choice to live there.” As the students delved deeper into the materials and learned more about the circumstances surrounding the lives of many of these people, the students’ expressions of judgment often were replaced by concern.

The students participating in the geography club discussed what happened during and after Hurricane Katrina. They also talked about why the locals, city government, national government, emergency response agencies, and other parties responded and acted in the ways in which they did. They discussed the lessons to be learned from the experience. By imaginatively living the lives of some of the characters they saw in the documentary, the students indicated they learned about empathy and were better able to understand and discuss a range of experiences. According to Fairbairn (2002), this is because people are often moved by plays, films, and novels, because they begin to imaginatively live characters (p. 28). In this instance, however, the students’ imaginations were tempered by activities that allowed them to use hindsight and their knowledge of how some aspects of the event turned out to guide their discussions.

According to Rosemary Geiken, Beth Dykstra, Van Meeteren, and Tsuguhiko Kato (2009) social interpretation such as discussion and presentation positively affect students’
These writers argue that many teachers ignore the socio-moral atmosphere that supports a community of autonomous learners. Jeffers (2009) argues that within the classroom, students must learn to cross political, cultural, and religious divides if they are to understand many global images, such as the ones portrayed by the different media with which the students multitasked. Fundamental to this idea, is that, as students learn and display empathy, their conceptualizations of social justice become more sophisticated. They are able to formulate judgments on the basis of vicarious, if not what they perceive to be, actual life experiences. This, for Jeffers (2009), gives them insight into the world of others.

The geography club students discussed how and why they thought that the images they saw in the documentary, the music videos, and cartoons related to social justice. This was important, because, while there was no quantitative scale developed to measure their facial or bodily responses; their angry questions of “why” prompted discussions of what social justice is, and why they thought that some social injustice was portrayed in the images they saw. For Fairbairn (2002), when imaginative story telling “is used in examining moral dilemmas, it can sometimes be perceived as threatening, because it challenges people to confront values and practical situations (p. 31).

The Students’ Reflections on the Unit

In retrospect, the questions in Table 2 should probably have been administered before the module on “Teaching the Levees.” The table shows the students had misconceptions about New Orleans, related to the population and wealth of the city. Eighty-eight percent of the students were aware of the cultural aspects of this city, and just over 50% of the students knew something about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on this locale. Overall, the students’ perceptions of the city were centered on its’ music and other cultural activities. The students’ reported that their perceptions of the city changed as they watched the DVDs and participated in the group discussions.

The students’ reflections on the overall module were meant to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses that they saw in the program delivered. It was also meant to ascertain how much they thought they learned, so that there could be a basis for comparison with the results from the observation checklist presented in table 1. Of the 26 students, 24 said that on a scale of one to five, with five being the highest, they rate the extent to which they enjoyed the unit on hurricane Katrina a four.

One student said four and a half and one student said three. “I pick four, and not five, because some of the stuff I already knew” (Eighth grade boy). “I picked four, because although I learned a lot, it was really sad” (Eighth grade boy).

“I knew some of what I learned, but I wanted to get more information, but I picked four because towards the end of the last DVD it got boring, they kept talking and talking and going on and I wanted to see more stories from the people who survived and more about how their lives have changed, I did not want to hear some person commenting on the impact of the hurricane” (Eighth grade female).

“I learned about the types of hurricanes, the categories of hurricane from one through five, now I know how hurricanes are formed, where in the ocean they start and how they travel north” (Seventh grade boy).

For the most part, the students indicated that the module was a valuable learning experience. Many of them distinguished between their initial impressions of what happened before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, and the knowledge they had develop-
Several of the students asserted that after this module, they would be less likely to respond in a judgmental manner when they encounter stories about victims of natural disasters in the media in the future. There was a clear indication that the students thought they will continue to question the totality of the circumstances which surround natural disaster events, and that they think they are more likely to be reflective in their discussions:

I learned about the real cause of the disaster. I saw some of the scenes on TV, and I heard that the levees broke, but I did not really know what a levee was and what they really meant when they said they broke, so all this time I thought that the water that flooded out the city came from the ocean or something like that. So, now I know what levees are and the fact that when they broke that was what caused the city to flood. Can I ask something? ... Why didn’t they take care of the levees, didn’t they know that they could break and kill them? ... Before, I believed the stories that said that the levees were bombed, but now I understand it better (Eighth grade boy).

Table 2: Students’ perception of New Orleans: Question # 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The responses generated by the students</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I thought the city was well populated.</td>
<td>15.38% (N= 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the city was rich.</td>
<td>3.84% (N= 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the city was fun and exciting, especially the music.</td>
<td>88.46% (N= 23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought the city had one of the largest populations in the US.</td>
<td>7.96% (N= 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew that Katrina destroyed lives in New Orleans.</td>
<td>53.8% (N=14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew that homes were destroyed by the hurricane.</td>
<td>42.30% (N=11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew that the hurricane was very devastating.</td>
<td>46.15% (N=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew that there was a decrease in population after the hurricane passed.</td>
<td>3.84% (N= 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not know much about New Orleans.</td>
<td>46.15% (N= 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not know much about Hurricane Katrina.</td>
<td>26.92% (N= 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

There is no shortage of discussions to be found in the literature on the potentially negative impacts of television on young children. Statements such as, “The American Academy of Pediatrics has long been concerned that children are emulating what they see on television” (Voorhes, 2008 p. 11) indicate that, in general, children focus on, and emulate, the negative images that are presented on television. Within this action research study, however, the aim was to use television images to teach students a relevant social studies lesson that carried geographical, historical, cultural, social, and political significance. The use of technology in this geography club unit made the images and materials to which the students were exposed less abstract, and in so doing, enhanced the students’ learn-
ing and the application of the social studies content and skills to which they were exposed. As is evident from the data collected and the above discussions, the students already had knowledge of the disaster of Hurricane Katrina and many other disasters, knowledge they had gathered through the media; a finding which concurs with Stephanie Feitelberg’s (2007) argument that, “The media endlessly replays minor and major disasters” (p. 1). The question is, to what extent have they been able to transform the “casual” knowledge in an academic setting that will allow them to have a retrospective glance at the event in its totality? For Fairbairn (2002), “The media retells stories of tragic and violent events as a way of remembering and coming to terms with them;” (p.23), an argument which is solidified by the fact that the students immediately showed sympathy for the persons impacted by this natural disaster. The teaching of this module, however, was able to help the students move beyond just sympathetic feelings to displays of empathy, while strengthening their understanding of social justice; this was mainly reflected in their debriefing discussions. While this was a single instance, it offers methodology teachers may wish to consider trying within their classrooms. It is important to note that the students who participated in the geography club when this unit was done were self selected, and were enthused about the topic for the duration of the unit, this added to the success of the unit. This point presents a limitation, since the unit was not done in a regular classroom, which may have additional dynamics that may impact the implementation and outcome of the unit.

The fundamentals of social justice suggest that all members of society should have equal rights and access to opportunities. The instructional design of this unit incorporated various principles of social justice in the content to which students were exposed. The unit used technology to amplify the voices of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, this technology encouraged the students to question the extent to which they thought the victims were, or were not, disenfranchised. It was during these discussions that the students expressed how their views changed from one week to the next. Additionally, the instructional design of the unit allowed the students to explore the environmental, socio-cultural, and socio-political context of Hurricane Katrina. Evidence of how these analyses shaped the views of the students came from the debriefing discussions, and the students’ creative writing and artwork. Also, the students self-examined and applied some of the information they learned about the impact of Hurricane Katrina to themselves and their lives. The students talking about how best to help the victims, about volunteering in the future, and about never making assumptions about disaster victims in the future, but perhaps attempting to learn more about the circumstances surrounding the disaster before making judgments reflected their learning. The students’ discussions and acknowledgements were, and are fundamental, to the students’ displays of empathy. As the discussions progressed over the weeks, it became apparent that the students’ responses were based less on their emotions and more on reason and logic that is rooted in knowledge. In essence, this is what teaching in social studies is about, exposing students to the physical and human components of their environment and society in a way that will allow them to display values and attitudes that are indicative of a ‘good citizen.’ So, although an event like Katrina will be taught as a part of their social studies class, be it history or geography, the students were able to apply the benefit of hindsight, perspective, context, and objectivity to their analysis. As the students did this they moved beyond imagining themselves living this event, to contextualizing the event in its entirety.
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Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans). Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SLXYRJnYm0&feature=related


**About the Author**

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“... as I watched I kept fearing that some of the people would die.”

“This was the emotional response the program tried to avoid. The debriefing discussions attempted to move students beyond this emotional response to discussions reflecting hindsight instead of sympathy, and an awareness of the circumstances surrounding the event in its entirety.”