



## Journal of Educational Controversy

---

Volume 3  
Number 1 *Schooling as if Democracy Matters*

Article 16

---

2008

### Teaching The Levees: An Exercise in Democratic Dialogue

Margaret Smith Crocco  
*Columbia University, Teachers College*

Maureen Grolnick  
*Columbia University, Teachers College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Crocco, Margaret Smith and Grolnick, Maureen (2008) "Teaching The Levees: An Exercise in Democratic Dialogue," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol3/iss1/16>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

# ARTICLE

## Teaching *The Levees*: An Exercise in Democratic Dialogue

Margaret Smith Crocco and Maureen Grolnick

Teachers College, Columbia University

### Introduction

Just after 6 a.m. on the morning of August 29, 2005, Katrina, one of the worst hurricanes in the history of the United States, made landfall near Buras, Louisiana, 65 miles southeast of New Orleans. Katrina brought enormous destruction and loss of life to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The hurricane also brought a crisis of conscience to many Americans as they confronted, with the rest of the world looking on, media images of people – many of them poor and black – caught in the catastrophic consequences of the storm, apparently beyond the reach of government protection or help. The unfolding tragedy forced the very democratic questions, “What kind of country are we? What kind of country do we want to be?”

The hurricane itself was staggering in its impact. Katrina hit Louisiana as a category 3 hurricane and made a destructive march across the tri-state area. For the city of New Orleans, which sits below sea level, Katrina precipitated a much more devastating second hit, the breaching of the levees. Within four and half hours of the hurricane’s landfall, the century-old system, designed by the Army Corps of Engineers to protect New Orleans from being engulfed by the surrounding waters of the Mississippi River, Lake Borgne and Lake Pontchartrain, had been breached in multiple places. By midday on September 1, when the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and the city’s flooding reached the same level, 80 percent of the city was under water. With costs to the United States’ economy now estimated to be as high as \$200 billion, in addition to the physical damage to New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast area, Katrina is the most expensive disaster in U.S. history. Current estimates of 1,700 deaths attributed to Katrina make it the deadliest hurricane since 1928.

Worldwide, the media broadcast pictures of those who had stayed on in New Orleans, or were left behind after orders to evacuate, being rescued from their homes by Coast Guard and private boats and off rooftops by helicopters. American citizens and those of other nations asked the question: How could the most powerful nation in the world seem so ill-equipped to handle a hurricane and its aftermath in a region where violent storms are a predictable seasonal occurrence? Since the affliction of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast, responses to this question have been many, varied, and highly controversial.

Important aspects of whatever answers people give to this question rest on fact, albeit disputed ones. For example, on September 1, 2005, President Bush told Diane Sawyer on ABC’s “Good Morning America” that “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees.” In response, many residents of New Orleans, a city with longstanding concerns about the safety of the levees, cried foul (Fromkin, 2005). As journalists probed the accuracy of this assertion, it became clear that officials at the federal government had, indeed, known this to be a possibility. In fact, scientists from the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center and journalists from the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* had warned that a breach might occur. Officially, the Army Corps of Engineers claimed that the levees would be able to withstand a Category 5 hurricane. In the aftermath of the storm, it became clear that the system was inadequate, even for a Category 3 storm such as Katrina. News poured out that the system had been so “chronically underfinanced that senior regional officials of the Army Corps of Engineers complained about it publicly for years” (Drew & Revkin, 2005).

Other aspects of answers to the questions of “why” and “how” this tragedy could occur relate to world view; differences in world view often lead to controversies, which are, at their root, disagreements over values. Controversies invariably involve disputations over opinions, but for disagreements to rise to the level of controversy, they must involve things we hold dear. Disagreeing about our favorite color or flavor may involve a difference of opinion but a trivial one. Debating issues of personal versus governmental responsibility in the face of a disaster will, by contrast, tend to provoke opinions deeply rooted in our fundamental understandings of who we are as citizens and as a country.

One of the central assumptions of the “Teaching *The Levees*” curriculum, funded generously by the Rockefeller Foundation, is that as American citizens, we are all engaged in the project of sustaining and perhaps even refreshing democracy in every age. Although in many quarters, democracy seems to be a spectator sport these days, we believe a knowledgeable citizenry and an engaged one contributes to a stronger democracy. Thomas Jefferson once quipped that “a little revolution” is a good thing in a democracy from time to time. We are not advocating that position here, just the notion that controversy, that is, contestation over the things we hold dear, is the lifeblood of a healthy democracy. In the case of Katrina and its aftermath, controversy revolves around any number of questions, chief among them: How much do we as a society owe our individual members, especially those who are most vulnerable? To what extent are individuals responsible for their own safety and well being? In practice, is our public policy driven by agreed-upon and consistently applied principles, or by biases and special interests that favor one group over another? In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the overwhelmingly inadequate response to the crisis was so self-evident that the blame game obscured underlying controversy. Federal, state, and local authorities squabbled over their respective responsibilities, confounding coherent public policy and practice and contributing to delays in response.

Effective leadership by the New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin, Louisiana’s Governor Kathleen Blanco, and FEMA head Michael Brown was in short supply. In the weeks and months after New Orleans citizens were evacuated to locations near and far, the “blame game” marched on. And there was plenty of grist for that mill. Emergency procedures, even though many had been rehearsed, were not followed. Communication broke down. FEMA, once a model of emergency response, seemed castrated by incompetence. In retrospect, it is clear that there was plenty of blame to go around, but just pointing fingers could imply general agreement about what should have happened and obscure very essential controversies about who owed what to whom. Some might argue, for example, that an inexperienced former roommate had been appointed head of FEMA, not just because of administrative bungling, but because the nation’s priorities for domestic emergency response had shifted and an autonomous, effectively and professionally led agency that focused on non-terrorist threats was no longer a priority.

One of those closely following the unfolding of events in New Orleans and drawing his own conclusions about underlying issues was the filmmaker Spike Lee. Lee was in Venice for a film festival at the time of the hurricane. As he later commented, he could not believe what he was seeing. In an interview he gave with HBO, he recounts how stunned he was:

It was a very painful experience to see my fellow American citizens, the majority of them African-Americans, in the dire situation they were in. And I was outraged by the slow response of the federal government. And every time I’m in Europe, any time something happens in the world involving African-Americans, journalists jump on me, like I’m the spokesperson for 45 million African-Americans, which I’m not. But many of them expressed their outrage too. And one interesting thing is that these European journalists were saying the images they were seeing looked like they were from a third world country, not the almighty United States of America. (Lee, 2006)

As the week after Katrina struck wore on, the images of survivors at the Convention Center or in the Superdome, suffering from heat, dwindling supplies of food, water, and medical attention -- scenes reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch, Hogarth, or Hobbes -- continued to be broadcast around the world. Like Spike Lee, many citizens were outraged by the slow pace of the response. People were dying in the Superdome and stranded and dying on the highways. Looting occurred. Nearly 15 percent of the police force abandoned their posts. Still, heroic acts by the Coast Guard and private citizens rescuing neighbors were also among the searing images sent around the world from New Orleans.

Shortly after returning from Venice, Spike Lee contacted HBO's President Sheila Nevins to say he wanted to make a film about the disaster, and she agreed that the project would go forward. The documentary film, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, was first aired on HBO over two nights beginning on the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2006 (see the HBO website for more details about the film, [www.hbo.com](http://www.hbo.com)). It is important for our purposes to note that the film is rated TV-14, or suitable for ages 14 and above, due to strong language and images of dead bodies.

### ***When the Levees Broke***

Spike Lee's film not only documents the apparent bungling that contributed to the Katrina disaster, but also takes a stand on one of the essential questions of democratic society – the level of accountability we collectively share for each other, independent of race, class, age or perceived “worthiness.” Lee reaches out to the viewer and makes his case inductively, personally, and emotionally, by featuring interviews with scores of individuals touched by the tragedy—some touched at arm's length, like the Notre Dame law student, Brendan Loy, whose blog had closely tracked the storm, and others up close, like Tanya Harris, a resident with her mother and grandmother of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. The filmmaker saw it as his responsibility to “ask difficult questions . . . as a filmmaker and as a storyteller . . . questions that I knew would stir up feelings . . . that would make people break down. Now that was not my intention. But we have people talk about how their whole life has been changed” (Lee, 2006).

*When the Levees Broke* features over one hundred interviews interlaced with depictions of the storm and its aftermath. Lee and his co-producer Sam Pollard interviewed prominent officials such as Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco as well as musicians such as Wynton Marsalis and Terrence Blanchard (whose haunting music provides the score for the film). They talked to Professors Douglas Brinkley, Michael Eric Dyson, and Ivor van Heerden, among others, as well as journalist Soledad O'Brien, Colonel Lewis Setliff of the Army Corps of Engineers, and Lt. General Russel Honoré, who led the armed forces sent to establish order in New Orleans during the week after Katrina. The provocative film resonated with a wide and diverse audience. *When the Levees Broke* is a magnificent achievement in documentary filmmaking that weighs in strongly on the meaning of Hurricane Katrina and provides an ideal text for addressing the controversies surrounding it. Soon after the documentary film's airing, inquiries poured into HBO from community groups, colleges, schools, and individuals about educational materials related to the film.

In early September 2006, HBO executives then contacted the Rockefeller Foundation, which, in turn, contacted Teachers College, Columbia University. The Rockefeller Foundation asked that Teachers College develop a curriculum based on the film. The Foundation would pay for creation and distribution of the film and curriculum to 30,000 individuals at schools, colleges, and community groups nationwide. Professor Margaret Smith Crocco, coordinator of the Program in Social Studies, drafted a proposal for a curriculum designed around the twin concepts of “democratic dialogue” and “civic engagement” concerning the controversial public issues surfaced by Katrina, especially those

related to race and class. In late fall 2006, Maureen Grolnick, who had a background in secondary education and curriculum development, was hired as project manager. Emma Taati, whose experience was in non-profit administration, came on board as assistant project manager. Teams of authors were then recruited to write an introductory history of New Orleans and create curriculum for the three targeted audiences—high schools, colleges, and community groups. An Advisory Board of national experts on various facets of the curriculum was also assembled who would critique successive drafts of the curriculum. The EdLab at the Gottesman Libraries at Teachers College would design a website; Teachers College Press would create the book and the box to house and distribute the film and curriculum. The final product would bear the logos of all three partners: Teachers College, Rockefeller Foundation, and HBO.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans, more than 16 months after the hurricane, the story of Katrina continued to play itself out. In early 2007, crime was on the rise. The Hot 8 Brass Band drummer Dinerral Shavers, interviewed in *When the Levees Broke*, was shot and killed while driving in the city with his wife and child. A census of New Orleans put its population at half the pre-Katrina level. Despite the continuing trauma in New Orleans during the fall and winter of 2005-06, George Bush's State of the Union address made no mention of New Orleans. In February, the Army Corps of Engineers revealed that more than 120 levees in states around the country were in danger of failing. Subsequent events related to Katrina and the breaching of the levees unfolded at a rapid rate throughout 2006.

To a considerable extent, therefore, designing the "Teaching *The Levees*" curriculum involved chasing a moving target. The issues were constantly evolving, with new information coming to light every day. Any published curriculum ran the risk of quickly becoming outdated in the face of constantly changing events. Nevertheless, the deep and essential controversies remained constant: As a nation, what level of responsibility did we have for the devastation of New Orleans? What should we do about it?

Awards affirmed the timelessness of Spike Lee's work. In March 2007, *When the Levees Broke* won the prestigious George Polk Award in the documentary category; in April, the Peabody Award from the University of Georgia; and in May, the Sidney Hillman award in the broadcast category. In September, the film won several Emmy awards. The Hillman Foundation (2007) citation reads

Spike Lee and Sam Pollard's documentary is one of those rare journalistic gems—a living record of a historic moment that gives voice to the disempowered. For hour upon hour, *Levees* walks us through the rising waters and the lives of people of every social level who were devastated by Hurricane Katrina, left to fend for themselves as government lost its way. ([www.teachingthelevees.org](http://www.teachingthelevees.org)).

Individuals interested in the curriculum could get information about the curriculum and sign up to receive a copy of the entire curriculum package at the website ([www.teachingthelevees.org](http://www.teachingthelevees.org)).<sup>11</sup> Publicity efforts also spread the word about the curriculum's availability throughout the spring and summer of 2007. In March, 2007, the curriculum went to press with an expected shipping date of September/October. Planning began for an event at Teachers College in early fall designed to address the overarching questions of the curriculum: What kind of country are we? What kind of country do we want to be? Lessons from Katrina.

## **Defining the Contours of the Project**

### ***Framing the Controversy***

Early on in the process, we recognized that the curriculum would need to be designed around the

controversial issues at the heart of the disaster. In the months following the storm, pundits from all corners of the political spectrum took opposing views about who was responsible for the horrific conditions unfolding in the aftermath of the storm -- particularly in the city of New Orleans. The most contentious debates involved the role of race and class in shaping the government's response to the tragedy. Rap artist Kanye West's comment that "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" crystallized a certain perspective about the reasons for the failure of government, especially the federal government, to respond adequately in the wake of the flooding.

*When the Levees Broke* provides an excellent platform for dealing with the controversial issues around Katrina. In contrast to an "on the one hand/ on the other hand" account that strives for the aura of objectivity, the documentary draws force from its very engaged position developed by recording the passions aroused by the tragedy. Spike Lee stakes out his own position in the interview he gave to HBO about the film and in the director's commentary that accompanies the film:

Never before in the history of the United States has the federal government turned its back on its own citizens in the manner that they did, with the slow response to people who needed help. Recently, there was another horrific earthquake, a national disaster in Indonesia. And, once again, the United States government was there within two days. Now it's great that we were in Indonesia in two days. But . . . let's get a globe [LAUGHS] and see what the distance is between the United States and Indonesia, and to New Orleans, and the people in the whole Gulf region. (Lee, 2006)

Elsewhere in this same interview, Spike Lee acknowledges that he agreed with Kanye West's comment about the role of race in understanding the government's failures. He altered West's position somewhat, however, in emphasizing the interaction of both race and class in accounting for the government's slow response to the disaster.

Spike Lee was hardly alone in criticizing the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Historian Douglas Brinkley expresses the same point of view, arguing that the government turned its back on one of its major cities—a cultural treasure—through its delayed response, an event he characterizes as unprecedented in American history. However, Brinkley's book, *The Great Deluge* (2006), is far more critical of Mayor Ray Nagin than the Spike Lee film, which puts greater blame on the federal government, in particular, President Bush, Homeland Security Chief, Michael Chertoff, and FEMA director, Michael Brown.

Many commentators in government, journalism, academia, and business have echoed Spike Lee's view that the government failed to deliver on a core responsibility —protecting its population—in the case of Katrina. In sharp contrast, other commentators held the victims responsible for their own fate. Some even argued that the hurricane was retribution for moral failure:

They openly practice voodoo and devil worship in New Orleans. You can't shake your fist in God's face 364 days a year and then ask, "Where was God when Katrina struck?" (Black Baptist pastor Dwight McKissic)

We've known for decades and longer that New Orleans has been a place where immorality is flaunted and Christian values are laughed at. It is the epitome of a place where they mock God. (David Crowe, Executive Director of Restore America)

We must help and pray for those ravaged by this disaster, but let us not forget that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city for so long. May this act of God cause us all to think about what we tolerate in our city limits, and bring us trembling before

the throne of Almighty God. (Michael Marcagave, Repent America)

Perhaps the best well known of those arguing in this vein was the prominent Fox News correspondent, Bill, O'Reilly, who blamed the victims in no uncertain terms:

So every American kid should be required to watch videotape of the poor in New Orleans and see how they suffered [after Hurricane Katrina], because they couldn't get out of town. And then, every teacher should tell the students, "If you refuse to learn, if you refuse to work hard, if you become addicted, if you live a gangsta life, you will be poor and powerless just like many of those in New Orleans." (Bill O'Reilly, Fox News *O'Reilly Factor*)

Newt Gingrich, speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February 2007, acknowledged the failure of government but still held the victims responsible for their "failures of citizenship."

How can you have the mess we have in New Orleans, and not have had deep investigations of the federal government, the state government, the city government, and the failure of citizenship in the Ninth Ward, where 22,000 people were so uneducated and so unprepared, they literally couldn't get out of the way of a hurricane.

These varying opinions provide just a glimpse at the substantial amount of "raw material" available for developing a curriculum focused on the many controversial issues related to Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the levees.

### ***Creating Curriculum from these Controversies***

Our task was to use Spike Lee's documentary as the basis for an inquiry into the film, its depiction of the tragedy, and the conflicting values and opinions surrounding responsibility for what occurred. Even more, we wanted to create a curriculum designed in part as academic exercise, but also one that led to democratic dialogues and civic engagement concerning the issues featured in the curriculum.

Recognizing that few teachers or professors would be able to show the film in its four-hour entirety, we organized the curriculum around lessons tied to specific sections of the film that could be used independently. One challenge we faced was determining how closely to adhere to the film. If we wanted to create curriculum that promoted democratic dialogue, then we had to treat Lee's compelling narrative as one perspective among many. We had to juxtapose competing perspectives against Lee's point of view as the filmmaker. In so doing, we needed to deconstruct the filmmaking techniques Lee used to emphasize his points; introduce alternative sources of opinion and data; and challenge some of his conclusions.

The greatest logistical issue we faced was the short time line: The Rockefeller Foundation wanted a roughly 100-page curriculum book ready for distribution at the time of the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2007. Given the demands of producing the curriculum and film package, the effective time frame for writing a curriculum for three distinct audiences was about three months.

The book begins with an Introduction, which offers guidelines for talking about controversial issues in the classroom and reminds users to preview any portion of the film they show to their groups. Next is an essay on the history and geography of New Orleans. The media literacy lessons are strategically placed at the beginning of the curriculum so that viewers of the film are attuned to how the film "frames" issues around Katrina. The strategic positioning of the media literacy unit at the beginning of

the curriculum also invites users to consider Spike Lee's perspective as one among many and to critique it along with other perspectives. One team designed a separate set of lessons targeted to adults who would engage this material in less structured settings than the typical high school or college classroom. College-level lessons are aimed at history, American Studies, race and ethnicity studies, and other interdisciplinary subjects with a historical component. Finally, the high school curriculum focuses on social studies, specifically, history, geography, civics, and economics.

The curriculum writers brought specific expertise linked to each of the targeted audiences and disciplines. They worked prodigiously on creating a curriculum under extreme time pressure. Their credentials provide evidence by which to judge the quality and authenticity of the final product. Their names are listed in Appendix 1.

Early in the project, we made a decision to hire a curriculum editor, Kathleen Morin, who reviewed successive drafts produced by these teams. Kathy helped insure coherence in the final product and also evaluated our success in promoting true dialogue by offering a range of views. We were aware of the fact that curriculum development usually involves field testing, but given the exigencies of the project timeline, we had to find substitutes for this step. Instead, we relied on focus groups at the National Council of the Social Studies in late fall 2006 for responses to our preliminary ideas, Morin's guidance, and the extensive critique of an expert Advisory Board. Their names are listed in Appendix 2.

From among this group, the social studies scholars who are experts in teaching about race and controversial issues, respectively, Jane Bolgatz and Diana Hess, proved extraordinarily helpful in taking the controversial material involved in this case and shaping it into a form to promote democratic dialogue. In the next section, we outline the particular challenges we addressed in implementing this goal. Bolgatz, Hess, and Thomas contributed short pieces to the website, which serve as professional development resources for educators teaching the curriculum.

### **Teaching Controversial Public Issues Related to “When the Levees Broke”**

We define democratic dialogues as structured discussions designed to tackle tough public policy issues. A curriculum focused on democratic dialogues needed to pose questions rather than provide answers. The central questions informing the “Teaching *The Levees*” curriculum are as follows:

- What kind of country are we?
- What kind of country do we want to be?

More narrowly, the curriculum asks:

- Why was Hurricane Katrina such a catastrophic event for New Orleans?
- Why did this disaster have such a disproportionate and lasting impact on poor people?
- What can we do as citizens in response to governmental failures such as those in Katrina?
- What can we do as a society and as individuals to minimize the chances that such a thing will ever happen again?
- How do we engage in structured, effective, and honest dialogues about such issues



To answer these questions and the other “essential questions” that structure each lesson, students will need to engage in discussion of what have been called “controversial public issues.” Diana Hess (2001) defines a controversial public issue as: “an unresolved question of public policy that sparks significant disagreement” (p.2). She points to three attributes defining this genre of discussion:

1. The controversy is “live,” meaning it is currently on the public platter;
2. Some “public” either informs or makes a decision about the issue;
3. Significant disagreement exists about the best solution.

Among the various controversial public issues taken up by the “Teaching *The Levees*” curriculum are the following:

- Are there two Americas, divided along lines of race and class?
- Should New Orleans be rebuilt for all its citizens, or only for those in economically viable neighborhoods?
- How should taxpayers’ money be spent in preparation for and response to disasters?
- In a democratic society, should the government be held responsible for the safety, health, and well-being of its citizens? If so, to what extent?
- Who should have been in charge—the state, local, or federal government—in responding to Katrina and the breaching of the levees?
- Would Katrina be seen as a “signature moment in American history,” as Spike Lee asserts? If it were, what would be different?
- Should private citizens be held accountable for what they did or did not do to save themselves or others? What is the difference between civic duty and heroism?
- Did the breaching of the levees challenge the way in which race and class are perceived in the United States?
- What is the role of media in a democratic society when there is a national disaster?
- Was the media’s widespread characterization of those who evacuated New Orleans as “refugees” racist or sensationalist?

Controversial public issues in general and race and class in particular are part of what has been called the “evaded curriculum” of American education. Suzanne Cherrin (1993-94) of the University of Delaware notes in her essay, “Teaching Controversial Issues,” that issues of race and class are avoided in colleges. Hess (2004) comments that “Even though many social studies teachers value classroom discussion, it is rare in most social studies classes.” Even though the United States has been called “the argument culture” (Tannen, 1998; see also Crocco & Cramer, 2005), precious little of this culture seems to make its way into most school and college curricula.

Discussion is critical in a democracy since it is “based most fundamentally on the idea that something

positive can occur when people are expressing their ideas on a topic and listening to others express theirs” (Hess, 2004, p. 152). Good discussions have three aims: “to reach a decision about what ‘we’ should do to achieve an end; to reach an enlarged understanding of a text; or to reach agreement on ends” (Parker & Hess, 2001, 281). Thus, we structured our curriculum with the hope that the lessons would lead not only to democratic dialogues but also to civic engagement. At the end of many lessons, we offer suggestions for “taking action” in response to the issues discussed.

To the degree that schools in general and social studies in particular are engaged in citizenship education, one would expect to see discussion playing a prominent role in classrooms. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze why so little discussion occurs in American education; nevertheless, it is an unfortunate reality. Contrary to the notion that discussions happen spontaneously, according to Hess (2004) they are most effective when they are well planned (p.154). Good discussions need a shared text; a focus, kept in place largely through the efforts of the teacher; and background information that is accessible to all students engaged in the discussion. The role of the educator is important in structuring the dialogue and insuring that multiple perspectives get heard. It is essential that participants—from across multiple perspectives—voice their opinions during the process, especially in the case of controversial public issues (Hess, 2001).

### **Six Challenges in Creating the Curriculum**

In the remainder of this essay, we highlight six particular challenges curriculum teams faced in creating curriculum to accompany *When the Levees Broke*. Each of these challenges were ones with which the teams wrestled throughout the curriculum design project. Some were more difficult than others and all required constant re-tooling of our efforts. We were assisted greatly by the several rounds of feedback we received from our curriculum editor and members of our Advisory Board.

The six specific challenges we faced creating curriculum were the following:

#### ***(1) How do we structure our approach to the “evaded curriculum” so as to maximize use of the documentary film and the book?***

The absence of discussion in most schools and colleges, especially concerning issues related to race and class, presented a formidable obstacle. We addressed this issue most directly at the beginning of the project when we considered the best way to distribute the curriculum. We decided rather quickly not to send the box with the DVD and book out to all high schools and colleges across the country. We decided that the best approach would be to have individual educators request a copy and to partner with professional organizations whose members would be most interested in receiving a copy. For K-16 organizations, the National Council for the Social Studies and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development agreed to partner with us, and invited us to present at their annual conferences.

At the college level, we contacted the American Studies Association and the Organization of American Historians, who also provided mailing lists of selected members with an expressed interest in teaching. The most challenging targeted audiences were community groups. We approached the National Urban League and distributed 500 copies to their local organizations. Despite extensive publicity online, in the media, and by mail, getting the word out to disparate community, civic, and church groups was challenging.

Our basic strategy in terms of structuring the curriculum was to assume we were not going to convince anyone disinclined to adopt discussion in his or her classroom to take up this approach based on our

curriculum. The best we could hope for was that for those individuals pre-disposed to this type of teaching, we might offer them some support for doing such discussions about issues raised by the film. We did, however, make a point of tying the curriculum to national standards—for social studies, history, civics, and economics. Although this surely would not have served as an inducement for individuals to introduce the curriculum, we did not want to present any other barriers to the curriculum's adoption by leaving the standards out.

Likewise, we looked for endorsements for the curriculum from important national figures. In the end, we received statements from Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League; Dr. Gene Carter, president of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Peggy Altoff, president of the National Council for the Social Studies; Gregory Thomas, author of the book *Freedom from Fear*; Gloria Ladson-Billings, past president of the American Educational Research Association; and Wynton Marsalis, one of the most prominent contemporary jazz musicians and a native of New Orleans. We hoped these endorsements might provide reassurances to potential users of the quality of this curriculum.

All that said, we also acknowledge that this will be a very difficult film to use in certain classrooms, especially at the secondary level, where the expletives used by many speakers and the pictures of dead bodies will make showing certain sections of the film nearly impossible. We repeatedly warn users to preview anything they show in their classes but recognize that the nature of the film will mean that it will be out of bounds in many high school settings.

## ***(2) How do we create a curriculum that will be long lasting and not tied to the particular events of August/September 2005?***

As Spike Lee mentions in his HBO interview, Americans have short attention spans. His film kept the tragedy in the public consciousness one year after the event itself. We hoped to capitalize on the second anniversary moment to launch our curriculum. We knew, however, that while issues of race and class would persist, the Katrina catastrophe itself would eventually recede from public concern. The media move on, but we have been gratified by the continuing coverage of New Orleans over the last year in newspapers such as *Education Week* and *The New York Times*, among others.

Our strategy here was to tie the particular issues to common themes found in teaching subject matter in schools, colleges, and communities, such as leadership, scarcity, house and home, protection, federalism, citizenship, and personal responsibility. We organized lessons for high school students into the traditional social studies disciplines: history, geography, civics, and economics; we presented the college history lessons in a manner mimicking a popular textbook series in college history courses that present primary sources on a particular theme, along with discussion questions; we created media lessons that touch upon the basic issues of critical media literacy; and we devised community discussions that address the fundamental issues of democratic citizenship in today's world. We hope that the questions raised are both timeless and significant, connecting to other themes and episodes in studying American history, culture, and the arts.

## ***(3) How do we get educators in Peoria and Duluth, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, Tucson, and Tacoma, interested in this curriculum?***

Although the curriculum focuses on Katrina and the breaching of the levees, we want to show that all citizens are vulnerable to such disasters—whether it is a tornado, earthquake, hurricane, nuclear power plant disaster, chemical spill, or terrorist attack. In 2007, the Army Corps of Engineers admitted that there were 130 locations around the country where levees they had built might be at risk of failing. Countless other areas are vulnerable to numerous other problems. Citizens often assume that some

governmental body has thought through the risks that might occur in their area and have well-conceived disaster plans in place for mitigating the effects of these disasters.

We try to use the curriculum to suggest that no citizen should take such matters on faith. Individuals must be prepared in the face of potential disasters in their neighborhoods and have their own plans for dealing with them. Gregory Thomas's work *Freedom from Fear* (2005) is an excellent primer for guidance about how families and individuals can prepare for emergencies of various sorts. It is also important to know what plans one's local or state government have made in the event of disasters and, where necessary, lobby for needed reforms. The curriculum offers regular reminders at the end of many lessons that becoming engaged in public policy issues is an important element of acting responsibly as citizens.

#### ***(4) How do we promote constructive discussion of these highly charged issues?***

Since discussion in classrooms is so rare, we made an assumption that users of the curriculum would benefit from guidelines for conducting discussions. We drafted a statement, which appears in the introduction to the book, with suggestions for carrying out democratic dialogues. The principles read as follows:

1. Clarify what the issue is and why it matters.
2. Be clear about the purpose of the discussion itself. Explain what you expect participants to gain from the process.
3. If available, point to examples of constructive conversations that lead to a course of action most people could buy into.
4. If available, give examples of destructive conversations that contribute to anger, distrust and polarization. (Check political talk shows for examples of both 3 and 4.)
5. Ask one student to be an observer. He or she will not participate in the discussion, but will be responsible for summarizing it at its conclusion. They might also be expected to comment on the way in which the discussion proceeded – the extent to which people listened to each other or how broad the participation was.
6. Establish ground rules. Ideally these might be generated by the group itself. Examples of ground rules others have found useful include the following:
  - a. Listen to what others are saying; be prepared to restate their point of view and its rationale, even (especially) when you do not agree with it.
  - b. Do not interrupt.
  - c. Do not monopolize the discussion. Take responsibility for making sure that you understand everyone's point of view.
  - d. Do not personalize a discussion. You can disagree strongly with a person's point of view without belittling the person. Never ridicule.
  - e. Take responsibility for any point of view that you express. Use "I" statements. Do not substitute, "some people think," or "everyone knows" for what you think and know.
  - f. Do not be defensive when your opinion is challenged. Even if you do not change your mind, challenges will help you clarify what you think both for yourself and others.
  - g. If you make a factual claim, be prepared to support it.
  - h. Ask questions. Maybe someone else has information that would be helpful to you and good questions often produce more progress than answers.
  - i. Admit confusion. You won't be the only one.
  - j. Restate other people's points of view. People are more flexible when they know they have been understood. It will also assure that your contribution to the discussion is relevant.

In addition, the essays by Bolgatz and Hess, available online at [www.teachingthelevees.org](http://www.teachingthelevees.org), provide

further guidance to educators about creating classroom climates that make an effort to have equal participation opportunities open to all those involved in the discussion of controversial public issues. Still, we found that, in writing the lessons, we often used the word “discussion” too loosely, calling discussion something that, in actuality, more closely resembled recitation. We also found that providing sufficient background information for many of these discussions of complicated public issues was difficult, especially since so much information was available online and likely to shift its location on the Internet or disappear entirely. Using short excerpts from online resources rather than relying completely on URLs was our ultimate decision, but gaining permission to use even short statements from contemporary authors was often a very time consuming and in some cases expensive process. We were constantly making substitutions of one source for another to accommodate our timetable, budget, and the need to keep the viewpoints balanced.

Likewise, we are aware that we did not make the curriculum as “readable” as our curriculum editor would have liked. The primary sources we used to structure these lessons are reasonably short but the average reading level is quite high. We beg the curriculum users’ indulgence in this matter, calling in the Introduction for the experienced practitioner to modify the curriculum in the ways that best suit the particular level of students he or she teaches.

***(5) How do we create questions that are sufficiently open-ended – questions that are not “loaded” and that draw on a distribution of materials representing multiple perspectives?***

This was one of the greatest challenges in crafting this curriculum. For example, we found that in the first few drafts of the curriculum, we were too often asking students to identify in “what way” something was a problem rather than inviting them to first consider IF it was a problem. In other words, we were asking leading questions rather than open-ended ones. In many ways, our own values and viewpoints were seeping into the lessons we were creating, undoubtedly registering a certain liberal bias -- unsurprising given our professional identities. Nevertheless, our curriculum editor was adept at ferreting out the places in which we all too obviously had stacked the deck, failed to consider alternative ways of evaluating evidence, or simply made assumptions about desired means and ends. Holding us true to our stated aim of promoting “democratic dialogues” across a broad swath of opinion rather than a narrow range of those who “think like us” and those who “think a little differently from us” was an important contribution of this external evaluator. Curriculum writers went back to the drawing board a few times to try to find credible sources whose viewpoints diverged markedly from the ones we had originally presented.

***(6) How do we acknowledge the fact that controversial public issues are often disagreements over values?***

Curriculum is always a normative statement. The “Teaching *The Levees*” curriculum is no exception to that principle. It seems as if even raising questions about race and class in the United States these days—and perhaps always—brand one as a person of a particular bent. But the challenge for the user of this curriculum is, in the end, to encourage dialogue and differences of opinion with a genuine commitment to the notion that, where competing values are concerned, there may be multiple “right” answers, as Hess (2004) reminds us. The essence of democracy is that such discussions need to take place regularly—in schools and classrooms, in town halls and taverns, in legislatures and the marketplace. The creators of this curriculum shared a commitment to the notion that this event *should* serve as a “signature moment in American history,” and that we must recognize that the problems of race and class are still very much with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

We realize that promoting discussion of the controversial issues of race, class and our responsibilities as a nation is itself controversial. While we expect that some might find the purposes of this curriculum disruptive, and, like the documentary itself, an exacerbation of tensions best avoided, we hope readers of this journal stand with us in affirming the importance of bringing these issues into the educational and public arena.

## References

- Bolgatz, J. (2007). Talking about race in the classroom. Available at: [http://www.teachingthelevees.org/?page\\_id=49](http://www.teachingthelevees.org/?page_id=49). Accessed on June 18, 2008.
- Brinkley, D. (2006). *The great deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. New York NY: HarperCollins.
- Cherrin, S. (1993-94). *Essays of teaching excellence: Toward the best in the academy*. Professional Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. Accessed online on July 19, 2005, at [www.unm.edu/~castl/Castl\\_Docs?packet5/Teaching%20ConstroversialIssues](http://www.unm.edu/~castl/Castl_Docs?packet5/Teaching%20ConstroversialIssues)
- Crocco, M.S. & Cramer, J. (2005). Women, WebQuests, and controversial issues in the social studies. *Social Education*, 69, 143-8.
- Crowe, David (2005, October 1) Storms as wrath of God? Some see punishment in natural disasters, but most disagree. Selwyn Crawford. Dallas Morning News. Accessed on June 17, 2008 at [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=10D069C9D1E61F70&p\\_docnum=2&s\\_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s\\_orderid=NB0108061715292225279&s\\_dlid=DL0108061715312319305&s\\_ecproduct=DOC&s\\_ecprodtype=&s\\_username=mgrolnick&s\\_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s\\_upgradeable=no](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_action=doc&p_docid=10D069C9D1E61F70&p_docnum=2&s_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s_orderid=NB0108061715292225279&s_dlid=DL0108061715312319305&s_ecproduct=DOC&s_ecprodtype=&s_username=mgrolnick&s_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s_upgradeable=no)
- Drew, C. & Revkin, A. (2005, September 21). Design flaws seen in New Orleans flood walls. *New York Times*, A1.
- Fromkin, D. (2005, September 1). A dearth of answers. *Washington Post* online. Accessed on May 27, 2007, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2005/09/01/BL2005090100915.html?referrer=emailarticlepg>
- Hess, D. (2007). Fostering effective discussions. Available at [http://www.teachingthelevees.org/?page\\_id=48](http://www.teachingthelevees.org/?page_id=48). Accessed on June 18, 2008.
- Hess, D. (2004). Discussion in social studies: Is it worth the trouble? *Social Education*, 68, 151-155.
- Hess, D. (2001). Teaching students to discuss controversial public issues. ERIC Digest ED457106. ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. Bloomington, Indiana.
- Hillman Foundation. (2007). 2007 Sidney Hillman Prize Winners. Accessed on May 27, 2007, at <http://www.hillmanfoundation.org/pages/honorees/2007winners.html>
- Lee, Spike. (2006). HBO Interview. Accessed on May 27, 2007, at [www.hbo.com/docs/programs/whentheleveesbroke/interview.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/whentheleveesbroke/interview.html)

Marcgrave, Michael (2005, August 31). Hurricane Katrina destroys New Orleans days before "Southern Decadence," Repent America, Accessed on June 17, 2008 at [http://www.repentamerica.com/pr\\_hurricanekatrina.html](http://www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html)

McKissic, Dwight (2005, October 1). Storms as wrath of God? Some see punishment in natural disasters, but most disagree. Selwyn Crawford. *Dallas Morning News*. Accessed on June 17, 2008 at [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_action=doc&p\\_docid=10D069C9D1E61F70&p\\_docnum=2&s\\_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s\\_orderid=NB0108061715292225279&s\\_dlid=DL0108061715312319305&s\\_ecproduct=DOC&s\\_ecprodtype=&s\\_username=mgrolnick&s\\_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s\\_upgradeable=no](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_action=doc&p_docid=10D069C9D1E61F70&p_docnum=2&s_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s_orderid=NB0108061715292225279&s_dlid=DL0108061715312319305&s_ecproduct=DOC&s_ecprodtype=&s_username=mgrolnick&s_accountid=AC0108061715311319252&s_upgradeable=no)

O'Reilly, Bill (2005, September 14). O'Reilly Suggests Katrina victims uneducated, poor addicts who live "gangsta life." People for the American Way. Accessed on June 17, 2008 at <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=19453>

Parker, W. & Hess, D. (2001). Teaching with and for discussion. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17, 273-289.

Tannen, D. (1998). *The argument culture: From debate to dialogue*. New York: Random House.

Thomas, G. (2005). *Freedom from fear: A guide to safety, preparedness & threat of terrorism*. New York NY: Random House Trade Paperback [www.teachingthelevees.org](http://www.teachingthelevees.org). Accessed on June 18, 2008.

## Appendix 1:

**Lucia Alcántara**, educational consultant specializing in organizational capacity building and development. She is a Doctoral Candidate in Adult Learning and Leadership in the Organization and Leadership Department at Teachers College, Columbia University.

**James Alford**, doctoral student in the History and Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. He has worked with high school students in Upward Bound Programs at Dillard University and Columbia University.

**Jeanne Bitterman**, lecturer in adult and continuing education at Teachers College since 1983. She has also worked as a teacher in alternative education with the New York City Department of Education for over 20 years.

**David Boxer**, Director of Instructional Technology and Research at the Windward School in Los Angeles. He has led new media workshops for teachers throughout the US and created a course at Windward on comics and graphic novels.

**Thomas Chandler**, Instructor in the Center for Educational Outreach and Innovation at Teachers College and doctoral student in social studies at Teachers College, Columbia University. He taught social studies for several years and is an expert in the use of Geographic Information Systems. He currently works at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University in the area of information technology.

**Judith Cramer**, Educational Technology Specialist at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has taught high school English, journalism and computing, and served as adviser to an award-winning school newspaper.

**Margaret S. Crocco**, Professor of Social Studies and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She spent eight years teaching high school history and government.

**William Gaudelli**, Associate Professor of Social Studies and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He conducts research in global education and previously taught high school social studies in New Jersey for a decade.

**Ellen Livingston** taught high school on Long Island, New York, for seven years. She is an Ed.M. student in the Program in Social Studies at Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Anand R. Marri**, Assistant Professor of Social Studies and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, who taught high school social studies in San Jose, California, for four years. At Teachers College, he studies the intersection of civic and multicultural education.

**Christina Morado**, secondary social studies teacher who taught in New York City for seven years, including three years spent at the East Bronx Academy, a technology-focused middle and high school that opened in 2004. In fall 2007, she moved to Los Angeles to work at the Windward School.

**Duane Neil**, Chair of the Art Department at The Chapin School in New York City. He has taught media education for nearly twenty years and art for more than thirty. He is also a frequent workshop leader at conferences on media literacy.

**Yom Odamtten** earned a B.A. in Multicultural Studies from Scripps College and an M.A. in Social Studies from Teachers College. She currently teaches African American Literature, United States and World History at a high school in Connecticut.

**Sharon Pierson**, Doctoral student in the History and Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Adjunct Professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey. She has also written history curricula for elementary education.

**Addie M. Rimmer**, doctoral student in the Adult Learning and Leadership program at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has taught journalism for 15 years.

**Cally L. Waite**, Associate Professor of History and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is also a former high school social studies teacher who was recognized as one of the teachers of the year in California.

## Appendix 2:

**Eva Semien Baham**, historian at Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**Jane Bolgatz**, social studies professor and author of *Talking Race in the Classroom*, Fordham University

**Douglas Brinkley**, historian and author of *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, formerly at Tulane and now at Rice University

**Milton Chen**, leading figure in educational media and executive director of the George Lucas Educational Foundation

**Emily Clark**, historian and expert on the history of New Orleans, Tulane University



**Sylvia Frey**, African American history expert and member of the UNESCO taskforce on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Tulane University

**Henry Louis Gates**, University Professor of African and African American Studies and Director of the W. E. B. DuBois Research Institute, Harvard University.

**Barry Guillot**, science teacher and author of web-published materials on erosion of the wetlands in Gulf Coast region, Destrehan, Louisiana

**Diana Hess**, social studies professor and expert on teaching controversial issues and democratic dialogues, University of Wisconsin

**Gloria Ladson-Billings**, education professor with expertise on teaching about race, University of Wisconsin, and past president of the American Educational Research Association.

**Victoria Marsick**, professor of adult learning at Teachers College, Columbia University

**Brenda Square**, Director of Archives and Library at the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University

**Gregory A. Thomas**, former Deputy Director of Planning and Response in the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and author of *Freedom from Fear*

## Notes

□ All 30,000 copies of the curriculum have been distributed. However, it can be downloaded in its entirety for free from the website [www.teachingthelevees.org](http://www.teachingthelevees.org), or ordered for a small fee from Teachers College.