

Lesson plan

Hurricane Katrina



Many thousands of people had to decide what to do when Hurricane Katrina sprang up in August 2005. Perhaps not all realised it immediately, but some were life and death choices.

Take your students on a journey, following the choices one man made that summer. His story is in many ways extraordinary. It is also one that faced many people and will again whenever a threatened emergency brings the choice of sitting tight or evacuating.

Like all lesson plans, this needs no specialist knowledge – for teacher or students. The compelling story will capture your students' attention and then all that is needed is a willingness to think, respond and share ideas.

Age group

11-16. Adults might like it too – feel free to include it in continuing professional development training events.

Timings

This is a flexible resource, so the following timings indicate just one way to use it.

Phase 1	20 minutes class time, plus optional writing activity
Phase 2	20 minutes class time
Phase 3	15 minutes class time, plus optional writing activity

Learning outcomes

- > Students will gain an understanding of the complex factors that influence choices during an emergency
- > Students will learn how to weigh different factors against others to arrive at an informed decision
- > Students will see how circumstances change and how decisions have to be made and recalculated in response to fast-moving events
- > Students will begin to appreciate the significance of planning for emergencies, both by relevant authorities, and in their own lives.

Phase 1

Tell students that you would like them to make a decision. Then read the following:

A fierce storm is approaching your city. The government says that hurricane force winds will destroy buildings. There is a risk of severe flooding. It orders everyone to leave their homes and evacuate the area.

Imagine a family – a married couple in their thirties, with two children and various pets, including two dogs. If you were them, what would you do? Would you leave? If so, would you stick together as a family, or would one of you stay behind to look after things?

Ask students for their initial reaction. Encourage them to talk about what drives their decision. Is it personality? Some people may be more trusting of official advice than others. Others have a strong attachment to their home and are reluctant to leave it. Are different approaches understandable? Or do students feel impatient with others who don't see it from their point of view?

Discuss the principle of ignoring orders from governments. What responsibility do we have as citizens to obey instructions which are issued for our own safety? Should we consider the safety of relief or emergency workers?

Ask students for any experiences they have had of being told or advised to evacuate an area. Did they just obey straightaway? Would it have been the same if it had been inconvenient? Talk about how to evaluate official instructions. Is it ever right to make your own decision? Talk too about conditions which would make it practically impossible to evacuate.

Optional writing activity

For a written exercise, ask students to devise the dialogue of a conversation between the husband and wife. Imagine that they disagree about whether they should go or stay. What might they say to persuade their partner to agree with them?

Students should aim for a page of dialogue that they could later share with the group.

If you do share students' work, invite the group to distinguish between rational arguments, which look logically at the facts of the situation, and more intuitive or emotional appeals. Is it likely that one person would be the rationalist and the other be driven by 'gut instinct'? Is that how it tends to work in life? Talk about the benefits and drawbacks of each approach. Is it possible to learn to have the best bits of each?

Phase 2

This is not, of course, a fictitious example. In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina was growing in strength in the Gulf of Mexico. Thousands fled the coast and the population of the city of New Orleans was ordered to evacuate. But many thousands stayed. Some had no means to leave the city. Others just decided to stay in their homes and 'ride out the storm'.

One man who did that is Michael Homan, from the family described earlier. A married man in his thirties, a professor at nearby Xavier University, he stayed in his home. His wife, Therese, and their two children left in the early hours of Sunday morning, and travelled to Purvis, in the nearby state of Mississippi, around 100 miles north of New Orleans.

Here is Michael Homan's description of what happened when the hurricane hit. Read this out or copy it for students:

It was an amazing experience, and the house outside survived with little damage. However the wind made the house racked, meaning the upper floor was blown so hard that the walls of the bottom floor now lean considerably.

But slowly over the next 36 hours the water rose, until by Tuesday evening there was eight feet of water in our streets, and four feet on our bottom floor. Me and the dogs lived upstairs, and watched from our balcony as people canoed by. I even got my acoustic guitar and played "dueling banjos" as they passed to evoke images from the film *Deliverance*. I kept thinking the water would recede and I could start cleaning out the house, but it never happened.



The dogs on the balcony

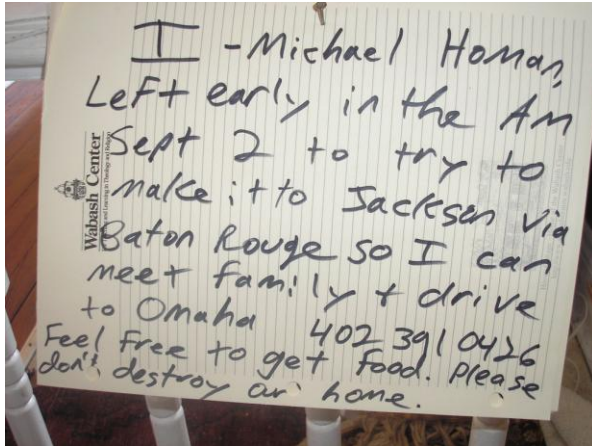
On Wednesday I swam to Xavier University, and I was happy to see that the university as a whole didn't appear to have too much damage, though it was badly flooded. I've heard rumors that one student passed away. I don't know the details yet, and I'm so sorry to hear about that tragedy.

I swam to my office and found that it was intact. So I swam home and was going to wait for the waters to recede, and then I would spend half my time working in my office and half my time cleaning the house. I had plenty of supplies, and was planning on experimenting with a diet of only home-brewed beer.

Ask for students' first reactions to this account. Pick out anything that seems surprising. Why did he say it was an amazing experience? Look at the sense of humour and relative frivolity. Do students think this is normal in difficult situations? Invite them to remember times when they were stuck somewhere. How did they keep their spirits up? Does singing and playing music help?

Ask students what might happen next.

Tell them that in fact, later that week, Michael Homan did leave his house. The waters did not recede. There was a growing sense of emergency in the region – not related directly to the ferocity of the storm, but to the flooding that followed it when the flood barriers broke.



Note left before evacuating

On Friday, a team of rescuers arrived in an airboat, and Michael Homan agreed to leave with them. He had been worried because he had heard that they were not letting people evacuate with their animals. But the team said that had changed, and so he put his computer and a few papers in his backpack and loaded the dogs. He also let two pet finches fly away. And he made sure that his daughters' sugar glider – a tree-dwelling mammal kept as a pet – had enough food and water.

Talk to students about the importance of animals in a rescue and evacuation. Did they realise how people's behaviour changes depending on whether their pets will be safe? Discuss how emergency planners have to take this into account.

Ask students if they think Michael Homan's rescue from his home is the end of the story. What would they expect to happen next?

It was not the end of the story. The arrival of a rescue boat did not mean the ending of troubles, but the beginning of others. Later, Michael Homan says that "everything went to hell". Invite students to imagine what he might be talking about, before moving on to phase three.

Phase 3

Introduce students to the next part of Michael Homan's story:

We drove in the boat all over the city looking for people. It was so surreal with the helicopters and all the boats up and down Canal Street amidst all the devastation. They packed all of us pet owners from Mid City into a cargo truck and drove us away. They promised they would take us to Baton Rouge, and from there it would be relatively easy for me to get a cab or bus and meet the family in Jackson.

But then everything went to hell. They instead locked up the truck and drove us to the refugee camp [Causeway camp] and dropped us off. Many refused to get out of the van but they were forced. The van drove away as quickly as it could, as the drivers appeared to be terrified, and we were suddenly in the middle of 20,000 people. I would estimate that 98% of them were African Americans and the most impoverished people in the state.

It was like something out of a Kafka novel. Nobody knew how to get out. People said they had been there 5 days, and that on that day only 3 buses had shown up. I saw murdered bodies, and elderly people who had died because they had been left in the sun with no water for such a long time. I've traveled quite a bit, and I have never seen the despair and tragedy that I saw at this refugee camp. It was the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life. I am still so upset that there were not hundreds of buses immediately sent to get these people to shelters.

Talk as a group about how the rescue turned into a nightmare. How would students have reacted in that position? Discuss what it might have felt like to move from the relative safety of their flooded home to a place where murdered bodies were visible and there were signs that old

people were dying through thirst and heat stroke. Ask students to list adjectives that might describe their feelings at that point. Explore how other people mentioned in the story might have been feeling. What about the van drivers who dropped off the rescued people then drove quickly away. What would have been going through their minds? How might it feel to work hard all day, in very difficult situations, then drop tired and anxious people in a place that they would rather not be? How concerned for their own safety might the drivers have been?

Continue with the rest of the story:

There was a group of officials going around and taking people's animals away. It was then that I decided to try to escape. I knew there were armed looters outside the camp, but there were inside as well, and I had Mosey, who is a pretty big dog and can be scary when she is barking. I could not have ever told my children that I gave up the dogs to save myself.

Officials were not letting anyone past the city of LaPlace [pronounced as in French] to pick up relatives, so I decided to try to sneak out of the camp and walk the 30 miles to LaPlace. On the refugee camp's perimeter there was a girl named Robin from my neighborhood who wanted to save her cat, and a guy we just met named Carlos who was trying to get to LaPlace, so we teamed up. It was an odd group. Me with two dogs, Carlos who is an African American guy who works in the oil business, and Robin, a skinny white girl who paints movie designs or something like that.

So we slipped out at 3 am and walked along the side of interstate 10 to Clearview, and then walked through the dark and destroyed neighborhoods until I was on Airline Highway. Amazingly the police never stopped us, I think because we were such a bizarre grouping, and we weren't shot by the looters or vigilante groups trying to stop them. Fortunately on Airline we found a shopping cart to put the cat inside. We then walked almost to the airport by 9 am Saturday. But by then I was about

ready to give up. My feet were bloody and the dogs were totally exhausted.



Carlos and Robin

Robin had a cell phone, but the batteries were dead. We found a neighborhood that still had power, and then noticed a gas station that had a broken window. Robin climbed inside and charged her cell phone enough to make a call. We knew then that her uncle would be in LaPlace, but concluded he would not be able to make it past the checkpoint. Suddenly miraculous things changed my fortune. Her uncle was retired from the Mississippi government and he had several ID tags, and he was able to finagle his way through checkpoint after checkpoint, and he picked us up, and drove us past LaPlace all the way to Jackson airport, as he lived just a few miles from there. When I got out of the van, there was Therese, her dad, and my children. Then, after an 18 hour drive, we're all safe in Omaha.

Invite students' reaction to the story before moving onto the activities below.

Refugee camp in your town

Talk about the realities of refugee camps. What are the minimum things students would want there to be, if they themselves had to stay in one? List all the requirements they can think of, from food, water and shelter to facilities for pets and play areas for young children.

Ask students to imagine a flood in their own town that required large scale evacuation. How far do they think the reality would match the ideal?

Timeline exercise: Fluctuating feelings

What would have been the worst time for Michael Homan? You might find it useful to create a timeline – beginning in the period before the hurricane and ending at the point that he was reunited with his family. Mark on it the key points: when he left his home, when he arrived the refugee camp, and so on. Create a fear and anxiety scale, with worried and anxious at one end, and safe and secure at the other.

Invite students to plot a line that might match the peaks and troughs of anxiety. See if the group

can agree what would have been the worst times.

If they disagree, talk about why and try to identify different reasons. What is surprising about the timeline, given that Michael Homan was being rescued?

Look at the worst times and ask students how they themselves would have felt. Talk about ways of coping. How much did it help, practically and emotionally, that they left the refugee camp as a group?

	safe and secure ↓	worried and anxious ↓
<i>wife and children evacuated</i>		
<i>time alone in the house</i>		
<i>decision to leave with rescuers</i>		
<i>taken in a truck to refugee camp</i>		
<i>arrival at refugee camp</i>		
<i>decision to leave refugee camp</i>		
<i>joining up with Robin and Carlos</i>		
<i>walking to LaPlace</i>		
<i>getting picked up by Robin's uncle</i>		
<i>reunited with family</i>		

Optional extension

Spot the dangers. For Michael Homan and his family, the story had a happy ending. But for thousands of others, it did not. As a written exercise, ask students to identify a point in Michael Homan's story at which things may have been different, and to use their imagination to develop the story from there. For example, what might have happened if the escaping group had been attacked – perhaps one of them was seriously injured, or they lost the mobile phone.

Notes

For more information and updates on Michael Homan's story, visit his blog at <http://michaelhoman.blogspot.com/> Use the archive facility towards the bottom of the right hand column to see the critical months of late August and early September 2005.

Michael Homan has been criticised for his actions. He has been called "foolish" and "reckless" for staying. The purpose of this lesson plan is not at all to pass judgement on people's decisions. It is much more about learning to assess situations and make judgements that are right for the individual and their families.

This lesson plan is part of the humanitarian education programme produced by the British Red Cross. Teachers and other educators are free to use it, copy it and circulate it for their work. Please always include this notice and the contact details below.

The British Red Cross would like to thank Michael Homan for the use of excerpts from his blog and for his kind cooperation.

This lesson plan was researched and written by PJ White and produced in August 2006 and November 2009.

This resource and other free educational materials are available at redcross.org.uk/education

Photos courtesy of Michael Homan

Page 1 Michael Homan's flooded house; page 3 the dogs on the balcony; page 4 note left before evacuating; page 5 Carlos and Robin.

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