Teaching through tragedy:
Use of dynamically created websites to maintain communities of learning.

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Abstract: During the Summer of 2001 the University of Houston, together with the rest of the Houston community, suffered through one of the most devastating storm events in memory – Tropical Storm Allison. At the time of Allison’s arrival the author’s summer courses were two-thirds complete and everyone was looking forward to a smooth completion of a successful term. As a result of Allison’s impact the university's main campus was shut down for a one-week period, and university servers supporting instructional tools went off-line.

This paper will describe how these courses were able to successful maintain there direction via a pair of dynamically created emergency websites. These websites successfully maintained a community of discussion within the class and enabled the completion of the remaining projects. This paper will outline the background leading to the collapse of the normal instructional infrastructure, the mechanisms and logistics of creating an alternative instructional infrastructure, and a discussion of its effectiveness.

This proposal was first thought of during August of 2001. In the chilling climate following September 11th it is comforting to know that even when normal systems are not present we can still fulfill our instructional calling.

Introduction
We often take for granted that there will be a minimum of support for our instructional efforts. At a bare minimum we would expect a classroom, some type of regularly scheduled meeting time, and a supporting technology infrastructure for web-based activities. During summer of 2001 at the University of Houston we had none of these due to the impact of Tropical Storm Allison. The university itself had been closed due to massive flooding (much of the downtown Houston area was underwater click on: 
http://hometown.aol.com/mkahnl/Courses/Tech_Math_II_S2001/cathys_powerpoint.htm
to see a few pictures showing the extent of the devastation), the university technology infrastructure was off-line (talk to Jerry Price, I am sure he can tell you a few stories!), and students were in survival mode and their resulting schedules were chaotic at best.

Technology to the rescue
This paper will describe how a pair of emergency websites, literally created on the fly, together with extensive phone conversations kept the courses alive. These sites were not fine tuned creations, but serviceable constructs responding to the needs of the moment. The author during this period often found himself up at 5:00 am with a cell phone in each ear and a voice transcription unit plugged into the computer. Despite these many trials feedback from students indicated that they felt they had more one on one feedback given in the class then other courses they had taken on campus.

The paper will further describe some of the logistical challenges of maintaining contact (one student threw a 200’ telephone cord across an alley to a neighbor’s apartment which still had phone service!) as well as describe differences in student product when compared with more traditional offerings of the courses. I will finish by including student comments on the courses. I am planning on including the url’s for the emergency websites so that others can see what was done.