

# Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) for Intermediate Courses  
Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

## ELA Overview

The following paragraphs describe the initial phase of a conflict over drinking water at Shady Creek Elementary School located in a small community in southwestern West Virginia. Shady Creek is located near Dry Creek in the "coalfields" region, where many people have historically made a living through coal mining.

One night at dinner 6th grader Johnny Ames announced to his family that he had a message from his teacher. The note he handed his mother read, "Please have your child bring a large bottle of water to school for drinking and washing hands until further notice." When asked by his parents for an explanation of this request, Johnny said, "The water in the school water fountains and the bathrooms is coming out reddish brown, so they said we shouldn't drink or touch it." Johnny's parents decided they better head to the school the next morning. As active members of the Parent/Teacher Association, they felt it was their duty to ask about what was causing the problem and to see what might be done. The next morning the Ames's were among several parents who came to the school to inquire about the water situation. School principal Denny Bruno met the parents outside and told them that the problem with the water was probably due to the recent heavy rains that had washed through the area around the school which, like much of the town, sits on a narrow valley or hollow. One of the parents who lived nearby said that the water at his house was also coming out dark and that he believed that contaminants from an abandoned underground mine were seeping into the well that served as the water source for the neighborhood. He said, "Those chemicals would have stayed underground forever, except the blasts from the new mountaintop mine over on the next ridge caused the leaks. Those blasts shook my house and cracked the foundation too!" The principal asked him to stay calm, saying, "Let's not blame anyone for this. You all know from experience that most times water clears up a few days after a storm." After a week, the water was still reddish brown, and some of the parents were becoming angry at the lack of a sustainable solution.

The problem with drinking water at Shady Creek Elementary school provoked strong reactions from some people because it resembled problems that the community had experienced in the past. About 15 years prior, chemicals left in the underground mine in the mountain rising behind the school had contaminated the groundwater, which turned a dark color. The mining company was forced by the state government to seal off some areas underground. More recently, some community members complained that the blasts from the new mountaintop mine not far away had caused

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cracks in houses and other buildings and also left a layer of dust on everything. Not everyone agreed that the new mining was causing the problem with the water. Coal miners, their families, and other community members noted that the mining industry was blamed for every problem that came up in the community and rarely given credit for being the area's largest employer. In short, the community - similar to many in the coalfields of Appalachia - had a history of divisive confrontations over problems that were sometimes attributed to mining. Community members were increasingly wary of getting into tense confrontations. But many showed up for the monthly P/TA meeting held at the school.

## Introduction to the Exercise

I would like you to begin by stepping into the shoes of the character you will be in the simulation. First, imagine it is morning and your alarm clock has just gone off. If you can, begin this exercise by lying down with your eyes closed to get the feel of waking up and beginning a day in someone else's shoes. What does it feel like to go about your day in this role? Answering the questions below will help you to step into the role and imagine the context and daily life of the person you will be in the simulation. For some people it is easier to close their eyes and try to picture the context of the person they will be in the simulation, taking time after having gone through all of these questions to begin their writing.



A mountaintop coal mine in West Virginia. Photo Credit: RJ Nickels

## The Exercise

It is early in the morning and you have just woken up: What kind of alarm do you use? What does your room look like? Is there anyone else in the room with you? Who are they? What are their names? What is your relationship like?

As your day begins, what are the first few things you do? Do you go and get some coffee? Do you need to take care of the children? Do you dive immediately into work? Often times we start our days with a list of things in our heads that we need to get done. What is on your list?



Mountains and Valley Community. Photo Credit: Susan Hirsch

From here I would like you to describe the sequence of events that happen during your day. Do you go to work? If so what is that like? Who do you meet? What are their names? If something happens that really bothers you what is it? Who gets under your skin? Why? Also, who are the people that are sources of support? Who are the people that give you strength? For each of the people you think of or meet, make sure you give them a name.

Finally you return home, and are getting ready for bed. What does it feel like to be home? What is your home like? What does it feel like to be you and live a life in your shoes? What is the last thought on your mind before you go to sleep?

Good night.

## Journal Assignment

(250-300 minimum - you may write more if you like): Using the questions above as a guide describe what this one day in your life is like from a first person perspective. In other words, you might start with something like: "It's 5am and I can't believe the hot water is broken again and I have to get these kids ready for school."

## Jamie Ames, Head of the Parent/Teacher Association for Shady Creek Elementary School

As a parent of a Shady Creek Elementary School student, and the head of the school's P/TA, you are in the middle of the conflict over drinking water in the school. You also feel as though you are in the middle of the broader conflict that the community has been caught up in for years.

Life-long residents of West Virginia coalfields counties, you and your spouse both come from families that include miners whose identity is deeply connected to mining and who don't like to see mining portrayed negatively at a time when the industry is facing economic challenges. But your family also include anti-mining activists. One of your aunts lived near the "Dustbusters," two local women who fought to get regulations to clean up the air near a coal processing plant in the next county.



A mountaintop coal mine in West Virginia. Photo Credit: RJ Nickels

Knowing that you are in a leadership position, family members are already offering you advice about how to handle the water problem at the school. Your main concern is to protect the school children. Your own son Johnny has already refused to carry a heavy water bottle to school, and you worry that he might be drinking contaminated water during the day.

The next steps are far from clear. When the problem first arose, the principal asked you not to call a special meeting of the P/TA, as she thought this might create tension and misunderstanding among community members. You went along with the principal in part because you sympathize with the position of someone whose spouse works at one of the coal company offices in the city and might get in trouble with the boss if a family member appears to blame the industry for the water problem. Now that a week has gone by with no change, however, you suspect it's time to take some action. And your activist-oriented relatives are urging you to call a special P/TA meeting and invite the community.

Questions still have you perplexed: What could a meeting accomplish? Who should be invited? How should the discussion of the drinking water issue be organized? What can be done to minimize tension and yet resolve conflict? Would it be better not to stir up community tensions, if the water is going to clear up anyway?

<http://ilovemountains.org/memorial/c301>

# About the Project

This Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) has been developed as part of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)-funded initiative that aims to enhance Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CAR) pedagogy in order to improve undergraduate learning.

The CAR field is uniquely positioned to deliver educational experiences that help students make the crucial link between abstract theories and practical application through learning activities such as: conflict mapping, intervention design, role plays, and simulations. The ELAs developed as part of the UELP advance specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, problem solving, and perspective taking.

Each ELA produced through the UELP has been designed either to augment existing course curricula or to be used as a stand-alone activity. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of their specific learning environments, including class size and course objectives.

All UELP project materials are available for public use and may be reproduced without permission. Please ensure that all printed materials display both the FIPSE and George Mason University logos as well as the project URL ([tp://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home](http://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home)).

As your partners in advancing undergraduate education, we are committed to improving the quality of the learning experience and encourage all feedback and recommendations to support that commitment. Additionally, we welcome stories that highlight moments of student insight that arise from participation in these activities. If you are interested in supporting the collection of data for ongoing research, please contact us through our webpage. ■



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