

# 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."

## Terry McAfree, Community Resident

You've lived in Shady Creek your whole life in a small house near the school. The water source for your house is the same one as the school, and when your tap water came out brownish red, you called the State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). They were not very responsive, so you called the County Commissioner's office. They told you to call the DEP.

You're just one person, and only a few other homes have the same water source as the school. You suspect that you'll only get help with your problem if a group of people decides to do something about it for the sake of the children's health. You remember when the underground mine contaminated local water in the past and the DEP was called in to help. Other neighbors say that the current DEP field agents ignore claims because they are paid off by the mining industry. You don't want to believe that and hope that a loud enough complaint from the community and county officials will result in some action.

Your view is that, if the MTM operation is at fault for cracking the seals in the underground mine, they should either clean it up or pay for the school and others on the contaminated source to be put on municipal water. At the very least you think that the mine should stop blasting anywhere near the community until the water problem is figured out.

You've only recently started to think of yourself as an activist on these issues, and Julia "Judy" Bonds stands out in your mind as a hero. Although you don't know them well, the young people who have set up their encampment nearby don't seem to have the best interest of the community in mind.

After all, some of them have been arrested while protesting the mining industry.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/04/AR2011010406697.html>

[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/us/13water.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/us/13water.html?_r=2)



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

# 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. ■



## School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

3351 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 4D3, Arlington, VA 22201

## Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education

1990 K St. NW, 6th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20006