

From Theory to Practice:

Intervening in Interpersonal Conflict

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)

Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

ELA OVERVIEW

The purpose of this activity is to work on connecting conflict resolution theory to practice in a concrete way. Each student will be required to think through how he or she would intervene in a conflict and practice this in a role play intervention as the intervener. These interventions will be video recorded, and each group will present a video to the rest of the class. The goal is that through this activity each of you will be able to connect what you are learning about conflict analysis to specific resolution methods that you can test out in a safe space.

We will engage in the following steps to achieve this goal:

1. Write a role play of an interpersonal conflict.
2. Review your assigned role play case in groups.
3. Prepare an Intervention Strategy using 5 theories, concepts, or techniques.
4. Discuss your Intervention Strategy during the Intervention Brainstorm
5. Record your interventions, with each group member intervening once.
6. Choose the best one and present it as a group ■

Guidelines for Role Play Write-up

Write a role play based on an interpersonal conflict that you have had with someone in your family, a friend, a significant other, someone at work, or someone from school. Or describe a conflict that you have witnessed. Write a few paragraphs that explain the background of the conflict and give some context for it. Your aim should be to provide the reader with a good sense of what happened, who the parties in the conflict are, and what some of the issues may be. Then write role descriptions for each of the individuals who are part of the conflict. Give the reader some insight into how each person views the situation.

These role descriptions should include each person's overall thoughts and feelings as a result of the conflict and should provide enough information so that whoever reads them will be able to assume either role with ease. Try to represent the perspective of each person as equally as possible. The total write-up should be roughly two pages in length double-spaced. It will work best if you write a role play involving two or three people. ■

Sample Role Play Cases

Case 1: Conflicting Conflict Styles

Conflict Context

Miguel and Rosa have different conflict styles. Miguel prefers to avoid any potential conflict and if necessary will engage in a “quick-fix” if a problem arises. Rosa, on the other hand, continually brings up issues hoping to engage in a full discussion of why the conflict occurred, what was the motive for the action, and how it can be addressed. This pattern has been going on for a several years even though the topic of the conflict changes. Here they go again—Miguel did something Rosa didn't like and he wants to avoid a confrontation. Rosa has asked Miguel to have a conversation with her when they get home from school today. She is going to bring up one of the issues that is currently bothering her. [Perhaps his going out to happy hour with his female co-workers, or that he never pays attention to her when she is talking, or he doesn't help out around the house enough, etc.]

Role

Miguel: You can't stand conflict. In fact, it seems as if your wife/partner, Rosa, is always looking for a fight. You knew it would be a problem to go to happy hour Friday evening with your coworkers (female) and you were right! Rosa is really upset. You know she wants to have a lengthy conversation about something (probably this issue)—frankly another inconsequential topic as they are just friends, and her timing lousy. You have a midterm exam to complete and you worked an extra shift today. You realize you cannot do what you usually do—manage this by giving her a “quick-fix” to anything that she brings up. [Which, of course, will spiral into frustration and take up even more time than it should.]

Rosa: You couldn't be more frustrated. You know that if Miguel will talk to you about how upset you are you would feel better! But he doesn't want to talk to you, especially about this latest episode when he came home around 8 pm Friday after going to happy hour with all the women he works with—who often flirt with Miguel and other guys, even in front of you! This time, though, you are going to make him talk to you and you have no interest in any of his “quick-fix” behaviors like “ah, it was nothing; forget it!” or “sure I can stop doing that”, or “I'll see what I can do”. These kinds of responses are so frustrating to you. ■

Sample Role Play Cases

Case 2: Conflicting Conflict Styles

Conflict Context

Three roommates were preparing to do a housing selection and a conflict emerged over who would get which room. They were choosing as a group of three so they knew they would be getting a random roommate assigned as the fourth person. They were going to live in a suite that had two singles and one double. Someone was going to have to take the double. One month earlier one of the three roommates offered to take the double with the random roommate.

When it came time to do housing selection, the roommate that agreed to take the double backed out of her offer. She gave the other roommates a list of reasons why she thought she deserved a single room. The discussion got angry and tense. Every time they tried to talk about it, it usually ended with someone just walking away. The conflict was not settled by the time they had to select their housing. In the end the roommate who had originally offered to take the double was placed in that room.

Role

Anna is one of three roommates trying to figure out where they wanted to live for the next school year. They knew they were going to have a random fourth roommate. So months before housing registration, Anna volunteered to live in a double with the new girl. As registration got closer, Anna changed her mind, and said that she no longer wanted to share a room with someone that she didn't know. Another main reason for her decision was that when her boyfriend came to visit it would be really awkward if she had to share the room with a new girl. Anna found out that she was assigned to the double room and was very upset. While she understood that she originally agreed to this, she wished Valerie and Faiza had talked about it more. Their response was that they tried to but that Anna blew them off, which of course made her even more upset.

Valerie is hopping mad. She thought there was an agreement and didn't see that Anna's excuses were valid. After all, it would be awkward for any of the roommates to have someone stay over if they were in the double room; what's so special about Anna's needs? It's true that her boyfriend had just moved to Kentucky after joining the army, and that he would never visit. But that still does not seem a good enough reason to get out of the double room. She is looking forward to having a "difficult conversation" with Anna because every time they try to talk to Anna, she would say she's too busy or had somewhere else that she needed to be. Valerie has called a meeting before dinner to finally talk about the situation.

Faiza doesn't have a boyfriend right now but after all, the roommates will be living together over an entire year, and surely something might come up. It seems like Anna considers herself to be better than Valerie and Faiza because of her boyfriend. Faiza was angry because Anna thought that she didn't deserve a single room just because she didn't have a boyfriend. Her other reasons were that she likes having her own space and did not want to worry about having her stuff in someone else's way; well, those are reasons that all of them wanted to have their own room. What is most annoying though, is that Anna typically deals with confrontation and tense situations by walking out. She has no problem starting an argument, but as soon as she realizes it isn't going to be an easy win for her, she just stops talking and leaves the room. Faiza and Valerie often have issues with Anna thinking that she should get priority on something, because for some reason she thinks she's better than them. It is difficult to have a serious conversation with her when she never wants to consider that she is in the wrong or should have to do anything that isn't what she wanted. Faiza is in charge of assigning people to their rooms for housing, so when the time came she put Anna in the double with the new girl. The issue had not been resolved, so Faiza held Anna to the original promise. ■

Guidelines for Developing an Intervention Strategy

In your group, read over the case that you are assigned. This will be the case that you will intervene in and will be recorded by your group.

A few things to keep in mind while you are designing your intervention strategy:

- You have the option to intervene as one of the parties of the conflict or as a third party intervener. When looking at the conflict, think about whether or not it has escalated to the point that you think that it needs a third party. This should help you to decide how you will intervene. Also, this choice will affect the type of strategy that you develop.
- The focus will be on the process of the intervention, not whether or not the conflict is actually resolved. Focus on what you have learned in class that can actually be applied in this role play, not on whether or not the conflict will be resolved.

Before our next class:

Come up with at least 5 theories/frameworks/skills that we have learned in class that you can apply to your intervention. For each of these, write at least one paragraph connecting this approach to the conflict that you will be intervening in. This will constitute your intervention strategy, which you will discuss with others during the intervention brainstorm. Your intervention strategy should be between 500 and 750 words.

Also, familiarize yourself with the role plays that other groups will be intervening in so that you can give each other feedback on your intervention strategies during the intervention brainstorm. This will also be beneficial for giving each other feedback when students give final presentations.

conflict, intervened? What surprised you based on what you had heard about their original plan?

- o What was it like watching yourself intervene in the conflict? What would you change about what you did knowing what you know now?
- o What did you learn from your experience of playing a role as a member of the conflict?
- o What did you learn from observing your peers as they played the role of conflict parties and as they intervened?
- o What are some general takeaways about intervening in interpersonal conflict that you gained from this exercise? ■

Guidelines for the Intervention Brainstorm

In this part of the activity each group will be divided so that they can meet with people who are intervening in other conflicts. Students will meet in new groups of 4 that have people who are each intervening in a different conflict. The group members will then explain the case that they are working on and share their intervention strategy with the group and their rationale for this strategy. Specifically the group should discuss the following:

- Describe the conflict that you will be intervening in
- Share your intervention strategy
- Explore the following questions based on each person's conflict and intervention strategy:
 - o Why did you choose these particular theories/frameworks/skills to apply in your intervention?
 - o Are there other theories/frameworks/skills that could be applied?
 - o How will you help the parties to understand each other, or see the other's point of view? If you are intervening as a party to the conflict, how will you show that you are trying to understand the other person's perspective and at the same time get yours validated?
 - o Think about some potential challenges that may arise during this process. How will you deal with them? ■

Guidelines for Recording the Videos

- Split up into your original groups and find a quiet spot on campus to record your role plays
- Each student in the group should intervene in the same conflict based on the intervention strategy that they developed, and the other members of the group should play the other roles specified in the role play
- The videos should be roughly 5 – 7 minutes in length and each member of the group should record a video where he or she is an intervener. In this video, the focus should be on the process of engaging in an intervention, not on coming to a resolution in such a short time period.
- In each video:
 - o Set the stage for the conflict. Explain who the conflict parties are, what the issues are, and what has happened that has brought them to this point in the conflict.
 - o Role play the intervention. (Again, the intervener can be a party in the conflict or a 3rd party) ■

Guidelines for Group Presentations

Students should present their videos in the groups that they made their videos in. Each presentation should be roughly 15 minutes long.

When you present your video as a group, decide on 1 of the 4 videos that you made and show it to the class. Your decision should be based on:

- How realistic the depiction of the conflict is,
- How well it incorporates course content, and
- Whether or not the intervention provokes discussion

The main focus of the presentation will be on the intervention, but each of you will focus on your own role in the video. You will then show this video, and each of you will discuss your role in the video and address issues specific to their role.

When you present your video, interveners can discuss:

- Why they did what they did. What specific techniques they applied from the course.
- What worked, and what did not work.

- How the dynamics between the conflicting parties and themselves impacted their specific choices as interveners
- What they learned from this process

Students who played roles as conflict parties can discuss:

- Why they did what they did. What specific techniques they applied from the course.
- As a person in the conflict, what the intervener did that worked for them or didn't work.
- How they were impacted by the dynamics between themselves and the other conflict party and themselves and the intervener.
- What they learned from this process.

Students who played the role of observers can discuss:

- What happened, and what techniques/tactics were used. They should describe any evidence of students practicing content learned throughout the class.
- What the parties did to successfully manage this conflict.
- What worked and what suggestions they can offer to make it work better. ■

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