

The Last Resort: Envisioning Change in an Appalachian Mining Town

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)

Student Materials

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

ELA Overview

Greenfield is a mid-sized city in southern West Virginia. Many members of the community have had family here for generations, and residents appreciate the town's welcoming atmosphere and the surrounding natural beauty. There are four coal mines (underground and surface) within a 50-mile radius of Greenfield, and there is a coal processing plant in the city. The mining industry is by far the predominant economic force in the community. In addition to the thousands who are employed directly by the mines and the processing plant, most members of the community indirectly benefit economically from the industry.

Like many other communities in this region, Greenfield has a high poverty rate, and has struggled to develop economically. Recently, a developer has expressed interest in building a resort near the city. The proposed resort would include lodging, restaurants, a spa, and trails for hiking and the use of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). It is intended both to bring new visitors to the area, and to accommodate those who already come for whitewater rafting on the nearby Lost River.

The developer is concerned about the current and future impact of coal mining in the region. In addition to the Lost River, the proposed resort is near Palmer Lake, a popular spot for fishing and boating. There are ongoing concerns about water quality in all bodies of water in the region, and although the connection between the mining industry and deterioration in water quality has not been proven, the developer wants to be assured that the issue will be addressed and that the water will be better protected. Potential expansion of coal mining in the area (especially mountaintop mining (MTM), which alters the landscape and may impact views from the resort) is further fueling hesitation about the project. Finally, there are concerns about the poor quality of roads in the region and their continued degradation as a result of heavy truck traffic to and from the mines.

The developer has had some lengthy conversations with the mayor of Greenfield about these concerns. The mayor is optimistic about what the resort could mean for the community, but knows that any time the coal mining industry's practices are called into question, the door is opened for conflict.

Even though there have been no official announcements about the proposed resort, there are already rumors circulating through Greenfield about what it will mean, and the mayor is concerned about the polarizing effect the rumors may facilitate. There is already a fair amount of tension in the community connected to the issue of MTM, and the mayor expects that anti-MTM activists will welcome the opportunity to scrutinize the industry.

In an attempt to quell the rumors and bring active community members together to discuss the proposed development and what it would mean for Greenfield and the surrounding area, the mayor has called an informal meeting with a few community members, the developer, the owner of a whitewater rafting company, and an activist who is a West Virginia native and member of an interfaith group that promotes alternative energy sources (the activist contacted the mayor and asked to be part of this meeting). The meeting will take place in a private room in a local restaurant. The mayor hopes that the neutral location, the relaxed atmosphere, and the inclusion of food in the meeting will all serve to encourage a productive discussion. ■

Optional Interview Assignment

Imagine that you are going to interview someone in your role (a mayor in a medium-sized city in Appalachia, an anti-MTM activist, etc.), and write about 4-7 interview questions. Anticipate that the interview will be no more than 30 minutes, so gear your questions toward an interview of that length. In framing your questions, think about what you want to know and/or think you need to know about this role to play it well in our simulation.

Interviewing is an important qualitative research skill, and forming questions for an interview is a critical part of the interviewing process. Even if you don't plan to conduct the interview, creating interview questions and thinking about design are valuable learning experiences. ■

Role: Chamber of Commerce Member

You have lived in Greenfield your entire life and have owned an auto parts business in town for 15 years. You joined the Greenfield Chamber of Commerce shortly after establishing your business, but you've become much more active in the organization in the past three years, as your children have grown older and you have more time for such activities. You are excited about the interest in further developing the tourist industry in Greenfield and throughout Mercer County. The area has long struggled to expand economic opportunities for its citizens, and you think that further capitalizing on recreation opportunities provided through local natural resources, such as mountains and waterways, is an important step.

You are aware that one of the concerns of the developer is that continued expansion of coal mining in the area will further degrade the natural resources, and will work at cross-purposes to

their efforts to bring visitors to the region. Although you have friends and family members who work in the local coal mining industry, you share these concerns. You believe that the region needs the industry, and would be even worse off economically if mines were to close, but you further believe that this is a dying industry and that Appalachian coal communities must embrace and develop alternative industries now to avoid an economic disaster later.

You've spoken to several people in town about the proposed development, so you know that feelings are mixed. While you understand some of the concerns of those employed by the local mines, you don't think they really comprehend that the mines won't be operating forever. When you hear that the mayor is gathering some members of the community for discussions about how to proceed with the development plans, you immediately contact her to let her know you would like to be part of this group.

Your organization resembles this one: <http://www.brccc.com/> ■

Learning Outcomes

This Experiential Learning Activity has been designed to help students:

- Understand a community conflict (parties, history, interests, issues, etc.) and how it is shaped by context and longstanding conflicts.
- Identify stakeholders in a conflict, including their roles, positions, and interests.
- Experience the intractable nature of the mountaintop coal mining conflict and the challenges inherent in working to address even one dimension of it.
- Gain increased awareness of interpersonal and group dynamics in a contentious group meeting. As examples, students should recognize the development of group norms, group leadership, and the formation of sub-groups.
- Take the perspective of individuals and groups who are different from them.
- Apply theories, concepts, and frameworks presented in the course to the conflict dynamics that emerge in the simulated meetings.

This ELA requires approximately 15 hours and can be shortened to 7 or 8 hours by removing some of the new scenarios. It is designed to be run over multiple class meetings but can also be run as 1 or 2 full-day sessions. ■

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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