

MOMENTS OF CONNECTION: CULTIVATING EMPATHY BETWEEN  
PARTIES IN CONFLICT USING ROLE PLAY

by

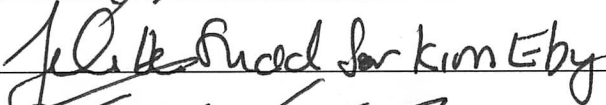
Gina Cerasani  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Conflict Analysis and Resolution

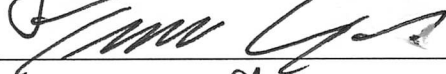
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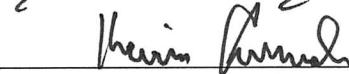
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Date: December 10, 2015

Fall Semester 2015  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Moments Of Connection: Cultivating Empathy Between Parties In Conflict Using Role  
Play

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to my children, Bobby and Bailey Haase, and to my partner, RJ Nickels.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the members of the support system I relied on throughout my dissertation journey. My extraordinary committee chair Dr. Susan Hirsch encouraged and inspired me every step of the way, and committee members Dr. Solon Simmons and Dr. Kimberly Eby offered invaluable guidance. My writing partners Lori Stephensen and Fatima Hadji provided dependable intellectual and emotional support. My daughter Bailey Haase spent many hours organizing data in spreadsheets. My partner RJ Nickels served as a technical advisor, an intellectual sounding board, and a constant cheerleader. My many friends and family members offered me their encouragement and their patience. Finally, I offer my heartfelt thanks to the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution community that made this achievement possible.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Conflict Analysis and Resolution .....	CAR
George Mason University .....	GMU
Mountaintop Mining .....	MTM
School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution.....	SCAR
Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project .....	UELP

## **Abstract**

### **MOMENTS OF CONNECTION: CULTIVATING EMPATHY BETWEEN PARTIES IN CONFLICT USING ROLE PLAY**

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George Mason University, 2015

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Empathy is central to many conflict resolution processes, but the concept has not been adequately described in the field. This dissertation investigates processes of cultivating empathy by examining structured classroom role-play activities which have been found to increase participants' empathy. The qualitative study focuses on undergraduate students' participation in role-plays about conflicts related to the practice of mountaintop mining in Appalachian communities. Components of the role-plays that cultivated empathy were discovered through interviews with students, observations during role-plays, review of audio and video recordings of the role-plays, students' reflection papers, and pre and post testing.

Key findings include the importance of narrative preparation for role-play and the performance of characters during role-play to the development of empathy. In particular, two activities were found to cultivate empathy in student participants: the screening of a

documentary film, and a journal writing exercise focused on developing a story for their role-play character. The study also revealed that the act of performing characters in an interactive environment contributed to the development of empathy toward other conflict parties enacted by fellow student participants.

## Chapter One: Introduction

*"I still don't like coal or what the collection of it does to our environment, but if I had the opportunity to discontinue its use tomorrow, I could not in good conscience do so without providing some alternative means of support to those who rely on the coal mining economy. If these new feelings about coal mining aren't a result of empathy, I struggle to imagine what else could be to blame."*

The passage above was included in a reflection paper written by Mark (not his real name), a student in a six-week undergraduate course in Spring 2011 devoted entirely to simulating a conflict in a rural community in the Appalachian region of the United States. The role-play activity transformed a small group of students into community members who were grappling with challenges concerning economic development, the practice of mountaintop coal mining, and the health and environment of their community. Mountaintop mining (MTM) is a coal mining practice common in West Virginia, Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia, whereby “forests are cleared and stripped of topsoil, and explosives are used to break up rocks to access buried coal” (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 148). It is a source of conflict in communities that are in close proximity to mountaintop mines, stemming from concerns about environmental destruction, human health, and coal as the primary economic engine in the region (Hirsch & Dukes, 2014; Tincher, 2015).

In the role-play activity, Mark portrayed a pastor who was considered a peacebuilder by many in the community, and who believed that issues surrounding MTM presented moral concerns in which he and the entire community had a stake. Through the role-play, Mark not only identified with the challenges faced by his own character, such as resistance from other community members to his involvement in the conflict and balancing diverse views in his own congregation, but he also came to appreciate the challenges faced by other stakeholders as well - namely, coal miners. As expressed in his reflection paper and later in an interview I conducted with him, Mark not only gained a greater intellectual understanding of what it means to be a coal miner, but he reported that he had a sense of what it feels like to live that experience.

As the designer and instructor of this simulation course, I identified multiple learning objectives for students, including an increased ability to take the perspectives of others. Perspective-taking is often associated with role-play and is broadly accepted in the field of conflict analysis and resolution (CAR) as an important skill for practitioners and for parties in conflict (D. W. Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1997; Neale & Bazerman, 1983). I focused my learning objectives initially on perspective taking, rather than empathy, because I was familiar with it and because I had not yet conceptualized empathy. Reading Mark's paper led me to reconsider my assumptions early in the process of deploying the role-play activities in classrooms. Mark reported his new feelings more explicitly in his paper than other students did, but others also expressed feelings and perspectives in relation to the parties involved in the simulated conflicts that were characteristic of empathy. In thinking about what Mark had written, I



contemplated: Had he really developed a new sense of empathy? If so, how had that happened? Does he, or do I, even know what we mean by empathy?

These questions set me on a path that led to this dissertation project. I wanted to understand how empathy had been conceptualized in the CAR field and how role-play had been used to cultivate empathy. Most importantly, though, I wanted to discover the pedagogical tools or role-play components through which role-play activities may induce empathy in participants. A review of the CAR literature led to greater certainty that this is an area in need of study. The concept of empathy appears in much of the literature, which demonstrates its importance to the field, but it has not been fully fleshed out as a concept with a shared meaning for CAR scholars (Bowers & Moffett, 2012; Broome, 2009; Della Noce, 1999; Frei, 1985; Gopin, 1997; Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012).

In this chapter I introduce the concept of empathy as I have come to understand it through this study, and I elucidate its important characteristics. Furthermore, I identify its place in the CAR field. I review the use of role-plays as tools for cultivating empathy, and I consider both the benefits and the challenges of using role-plays in CAR classrooms, especially for the purposes of improving perspective-taking and cultivating empathy. Next, I present the research methods employed in this study and the substantive findings the research produced, that narrative activities in preparation for role-plays and the performance of a character in a role-play contribute to the cultivation of empathy in role-play participants. Finally, I provide an outline of the dissertation.

## **Unpacking Empathy**

As an internal state, empathy is difficult to recognize and understand. CAR practitioners and scholars have long recognized the need to develop methods for encouraging parties engaged in a conflict to try to empathize with one another, or at least to begin to understand the other party's perspective (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Broome, 1991, 2009; Ramsbotham, Miall, & Woodhouse, 2011). For example, facilitated dialogue is a conflict resolution process designed to offer participants opportunities to share their perspectives on an issue and to learn about the perspectives of others. However, empathy is often referenced in passing without conceptualization. For instance, distinctions between cognitive and emotional expressions of empathy, common in the psychology literature, are infrequently addressed in the CAR literature. Although some scholars, such as Della Noce (1999), make such distinctions, nuanced discussions of empathy are rare in the CAR field.

A preeminent CAR scholar who seeks to better understand how empathy operates, Kriesberg presents the following components of empathy for addressing conflict escalation:

First, empathy includes accurately perceiving the other person's feelings and thoughts related to the conflict. Second, empathetic persons experience those feelings and thoughts as if they were their own. Third, persons distinguish their own thoughts and feelings from those of the person with whom they empathize. Finally, empathy includes communicating the experience of empathy. (2012, p. 190).

The first three provide a strong foundation for a basic understanding of empathy, while the fourth is less a component of empathy and more a component of conflict resolution. Although Kriesberg offers some insight into the way empathy operates, the complexity of empathy is not fully captured in these components. By contrast, Gopin does not conceptualize empathy as components, but acknowledges its complexity when he writes that it is “evoked by the painful story of the other party” and it “generates a common bond between enemies” (1997, p. 10). Although such statements reflect the multifaceted nature of empathy, they fail to offer a description of what it is.

The aim of this study is, in part, to fill the absence in the CAR field of a rich, nuanced understanding of empathy. In so doing, I surveyed the CAR literature on empathy, and I explored the conceptualization of empathy in multiple fields - namely, anthropology, psychology and performance studies - to develop an understanding of this concept that better serves the CAR field. Through my research, the following key ideas have emerged and contributed to my understanding of empathy:

1. Empathy is both cognitive and affective. To empathize is to do more than develop a connection with another person on an intellectual level. However, even though empathy is sometimes defined as 'feeling with' another, recognizing and operationalizing that is somewhat problematic. While one can imagine questions to establish the validity of a cognitive connection, how does one do the same for emotion? It is a challenge, but less so if we shift our thinking from conceptualizing the cognitive and affective elements of empathy as distinct, to imagining them as intertwined and messy. It is possible

to detect affective elements of empathy in phrases like, "I imagine it feels like...";

2. Empathy is experiential. Dispositional empathy, in particular, is thought of as a static ability or capacity. By this measure, one either possesses or lacks an innate capacity to empathize. There is a great deal of evidence, however, to support the idea that empathy can be taught through experiences (Monroe, 2006; Pinderhughes, 1979; Shapiro, Morrison, & Boker, 2004). More importantly, my research is not concerned with empathy as an abstract idea, but with empathy cultivated through intersubjective experiences.
3. Empathy is dynamic and experienced as moments of connection. One's experience of empathy frequently moves through moments of connection and disconnection, from "feelings of mutual understanding, attunement, and compassion to feelings of confusion, misalignment, and singularity..." (Throop, 2010, p. 771). When one attempts to empathize, it is not always successful, and sometimes it is impossible to know if the attempt has succeeded - meaning that one really did gain a better understanding of the perspective, feelings and experience of another - until a later time. Through self-reflexivity, however, one can critically examine efforts to empathize, can identify moments of connection and disconnection, and can begin to better understand what is happening in those moments.

Empathy is an important concept in the CAR field, but it has never been developed in the way it has in other fields. Doing so will provide CAR scholars and

practitioners with a clearer understanding of what it is, how it operates, and how to cultivate it, and will further provide instructors with a better sense of how to teach it. In Chapter Two I present an extensive review of the empathy literature from multiple fields, and I justify the conceptualization of empathy that emerges from my research.

### **Empathy through Role-Play**

I studied the cultivation of empathy through role-play activities, a pedagogical tool common to CAR classrooms. In part, I focused my research on role-play because it is what led to my curiosity about empathy. Beyond that, however, I was persuaded by the knowledge that a key objective of classroom role-plays is to engage students in a first-person experience of conflict, which is closely aligned with empathy. This makes role-plays ideal for examining efforts in the field to induce empathy. Role-play is a type of simulation, which is a category of activities that are designed to replicate some aspect of reality, and which includes a variety of games and computer simulations (Hale Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2002). The role-plays I studied included preparatory activities, such as caucusing sessions with students who were assigned the same character, as well as activities that occurred between meetings in which students were in character, such as debriefing sessions. In this dissertation, I refer to the overall activity as the role-play, which encompasses the preparatory activities and the debriefing sessions, and I refer to the sessions when students are in character as the simulated meetings.

As an undergraduate instructor and a member of the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution's (SCAR) Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), I designed the aforementioned course (Simulation in Community and Organizational

Conflict Resolution), which was a one-credit conflict simulation featuring a role-play titled *The Last Resort: Envisioning Change in an Appalachian Mining Community*. In addition to the one-credit course, I taught another class (Community, Group, and Organizational Conflict Analysis and Resolution) for several semesters that included a role-play activity, *Can We Drink the Water?: Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community*, which was similarly focused on conflicts associated with MTM. Other SCAR undergraduate instructors who taught Community, Group, and Organizational Conflict Analysis and Resolution included *Can We Drink the Water?* in their course, and they allowed me to observe the role-play sessions in those classes.

The UELP was a three-year Department of Education grant-funded project that was formed to develop experiential activities for undergraduate CAR classrooms at George Mason University (GMU) and other institutions of higher learning, and to conduct research on aspects of experiential learning related to the activities. The two role-play activities at the center of my study were created through the UELP. The genesis of the role-plays is relevant because it is useful to know that they were developed collaboratively by a team of faculty and graduate students who were engaged in thinking about experiential learning and identifying best practices.

I describe the role-plays I studied in great detail in subsequent chapters; for some background, they were based on current MTM conflicts, and they were developed through firsthand knowledge and research of the conflicts. They included several activities to prepare students for role-play participation, such as a lecture on the history and meaning of the conflict, a documentary film set in an Appalachian community with

divided positions on MTM, and a journal writing exercise. Both of the role-plays ran for two or more class sessions.

**Role-play in CAR classrooms.** Role-play activities are commonly included in CAR classrooms, particularly at the undergraduate level, for a few reasons. In part, they provide a diversion from the traditional lecture format, and many students find them enjoyable. They also offer instructors an interactive way of teaching students about a particular conflict, and illustrating the dynamics of conflict. Some role-plays include roles for third-party interveners, and when structured this way, they provide opportunities for students in those roles to practice conflict resolution skills, such as mediation and negotiation.

The types of role-plays used in CAR classrooms vary from those that simulate interpersonal conflicts, such as disputes among roommates, to those that simulate international conflicts. One role-play that was developed by the UELP team, *Adding Fuel to the Fire: Energy Resources and International Negotiation in the Eastern Mediterranean*, simulated a United Nations summit aimed at preventing interstate conflict over undersea gas and oil fields recently discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean. Other role-plays, such as the ones I studied, focus on community-level conflict. The complexity of the conflict informed the structure of a role-play; the role-plays developed by the UELP addressed intractable conflicts that could not be fully appreciated in short sessions of role-play. Not only did students prepare extensively for participation in the role-plays, the activities themselves spanned multiple class sessions to allow students sufficient time to engage in as many aspects of the conflict as possible.

As a pedagogical tool, role-plays, like other tools, have supporters and detractors. Some CAR instructors find them beneficial for some of the previously stated reasons, such as potentially increased student engagement and the opportunity to practice conflict intervention skills. Additionally, the subject matter of a course may be better retained through experiential activities, such as role-play (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997). Others have concerns about students' ability to play characters well, and the harm that may result in students reinforcing stereotypes through their performances, as well as concerns about students who feel uncomfortable with role-play because they have reserved personalities. In the subsequent sections I take a closer look at some of the benefits and challenges of using role-plays in CAR classrooms.

**Benefits of role-play.** Multiple studies have found that students are more interested in the subject matter, and more likely to retain what they have learned, when the material is taught using simulations (Craig & Amernic, 1994; DeNeve & Heppner, 1997b; Druckman & Ebner, 2008).

In addition to such educational benefits, the performance aspect of role-play activities shifts students from merely being audiences hearing stories to enactors of those stories. This shift presents its own challenges with regard to the abilities of students to authentically perform those stories (Shuman, 2005). Authentic participation is marked by engaged, focused participation in a learning activity (Hadjioannou, 2007; Hale & City, 2006, pp. 79–85). Hale and City identify the challenges to authentic participation as nonparticipation and superficial participation, which affirm my experiences and observations of the role-plays I studied. As the name implies, nonparticipation is a lack of



student participation. Instead of participating in a classroom activity, the student may be engaged in another activity, such as surfing the Internet, or may be sitting silently.

Superficial participation tends to result from a student feeling compelled to participate, but not valuing the activity.

When applied to the role-play activities, authentic participation included such things as staying in character, fully engaging in the simulated meetings, and expressing emotions when appropriate. Authentic participation in a role-play was an indicator of a student empathizing with their own or other characters, in that to perform authentically, one has likely formed an understanding of the character's perspective. Although enacting the stories of others is not an easy task, it may be through such imperfect efforts to understand parties in conflict by experiencing that conflict in a constructed time and space that students move from academic interest in the conflict to a stronger sense of connection with the parties, as well as an appreciation of the conflict's intractability.

When students are assigned the roles of parties with whom they seem to have little to nothing in common, they are asked to travel a great distance from a starting position of unfamiliarity and uncertainty, to a place where they can portray their character authentically. It is not difficult for undergraduate students to role-play a roommate conflict; for most it is familiar and represents where they are in their lives. But when a student is asked to play the role of a school principal who is facing angry parents because the school's water is contaminated, and members of the community are blaming the coal mining industry, and the principal's spouse is employed by that industry, the student is asked to move into what is likely unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. It is important

to keep in mind, however, that these students are preparing to be conflict analysts and practitioners and, as practitioners, will be in a position to ask parties to move into unfamiliar and uncomfortable spaces. To have this experience, then, not only offers students a sense of what parties in a conflict experience, but also the experience of trying to understand others in an intractable conflict.

Debriefing sessions, in particular, provide opportunities for such confrontations, and for reflecting upon experiences in simulated meetings. Role-play debriefing is a practice with the purpose of providing context for what occurred while participants were performing in character. It can be used to address stereotypes that emerged in the course of a simulated meeting (a point I address in greater detail in the subsequent section), and it can serve as a process for illuminating concepts and theories studied in a course that have been put into practice in the simulation (Shearer & Davidhizar, 2003; Stafford, 2005). Van Ments maintains that it is in the debriefing that “the meaning of the enactment is clarified” (1999, p. 133).

**Role-play challenges.** Despite their frequent use in CAR classrooms, some view role-plays as exercises that are, at best, inauthentic, and at worst, promoters of cultural stereotypes (Alexander & LeBaron, 2009, 2013). To be sure, role-play activities provide challenges for designers, facilitators, and participants. The risk that participants will reinforce stereotypes through their performances must be taken seriously, but it does not present an insurmountable challenge. Later in this dissertation I address pedagogical best practices for role-plays, but here I share a story that illustrates the challenge.

While using the MTM role-play in one classroom, students in one of the small group simulated meetings decided to adopt what they considered to be Appalachian accents. I heard the accents near the end of the meeting, as did other students in the class. During the debriefing session after the meeting, a student said he heard the students speaking with accents, and it offended him. He shared that his family is from the Appalachian region, and hearing students use the accents reminded him of the stereotypes that plague those who live in the region. One of the students in the group using the accents also used what one might consider to be a stereotypical name - 'Billy Bob' or some equivalent - further reinforcing potentially painful stereotypes. The students using the accents were taken aback by what they heard from other students, and they assured the group that they were actually trying to perform authentically, while admittedly having some fun in the process. At this point, we ran out of time as class ended, and I was left to consider how I would address this in our next session. After conferring with colleagues, I developed some questions to engage students in critical thinking about the assumptions we had all made, and how those assumptions affected the activity and affected us personally. The potential harm caused by performing stereotypes in a role-play is real, but the classroom space affords important opportunities to confront the stereotypes through processes of debriefing and reflecting on what has occurred.

Challenges inherent in role-play activities need to be addressed by instructors who use them, but the benefits of such activities in CAR classrooms, especially when they are developed and deployed in ways that minimize risks and address concerns, are potentially great. It is impractical and unethical to directly involve CAR students with few skills and

little experience in many of the types of conflicts that are enacted through role-play. However, in a well-constructed classroom space, students have opportunities to experience the dynamics of a conflict that might otherwise be inaccessible. With a focus on perspective-taking and increased understanding of a conflict and the parties involved, role-play activities are ideal as a site for studying the cultivation of empathy. In Chapter Four I explore the narrative and performance elements of role-play, as components that are identified with empathy, and I introduce best practices for role-plays that are intended to increase empathy.

### **Project Objectives**

Focusing my research on undergraduate CAR students allowed me to explore an environment in which efforts to cultivate and teach perspective taking and empathy are pervasive, if not always explicit. Role-play is a common practice for achieving such objectives, as they are intended to allow students to experience a conflict as if they were a party to it, and to engage in the conflict, as well as attempts to resolve it, from the perspective of their character. Through examination of the effectiveness of role-play activities as one pedagogical approach to teaching empathy, I explored the elements of role-play that induce empathy, and I examined various approaches to role-play in an effort to discover best practices that can be implemented by CAR educators and practitioners.

I studied the experiences of undergraduate students at George Mason University and Grinnell College as they engaged in role-play activities in CAR classrooms. This study employs qualitative research methods, including analysis of pre-tests and post-tests

taken by students who have participated in classroom role-play activities; semi-structured interviews with selected students; content analysis of student reflection papers and audio and video recordings of role-play activities; and researcher observations of role-play activities in classrooms. The following questions guided my research:

1. What does empathy mean and how is it recognized in the CAR field? Why is empathy important for analysts and practitioners, and for CAR students, as nascent CAR scholars and practitioners?
2. How are role-play activities used in CAR undergraduate classrooms to cultivate empathy for parties in conflict?
3. To what extent and in what ways do role-play activities cultivate empathy in students?
4. What are the pedagogical methods that transform a role-play from a cognitive classroom exercise to one in which students experience both cognitive and emotional engagement in the process of developing empathy for the parties represented in the role-play?

Some of the data I analyzed were collected as part of the UELP. The pre-tests and post-tests had already been developed to evaluate the UELP activities when I initiated my research project. In addition, reflection papers, written by students after participating in a role-play, were assigned by instructors in all classes in which the role-plays were included. Although role-play activities had been audio and video recorded prior to the inception of my project, I continued to record activities beyond the point at which the UELP had collected sufficient recordings for evaluation purposes. Finally, I interviewed

a small group of students who had participated in either of the role-plays I studied; I selected interviewees on the basis of a demonstration of empathy during simulated meetings and/or debriefing sessions. In selecting students for interview requests, I identified students who were performing their characters authentically; that is, they were staying in role and interacting in meetings in a manner that fit with the description of their character. I also identified students who spoke in debriefing sessions about connecting with their own or other characters.

Because there is a great deal of evidence establishing that role-play activities are effective tools for cultivating empathy, I focused my research on understanding how that process occurs. Therefore, my analysis centered on discovering the components of the activities that contributed to the cultivation of empathy. To that end, I engaged with multiple forms of data, including audio recordings of interviews with students; audio and video recordings of role-play and debriefing sessions; students' reflection papers; and pre and post tests that were developed by UELP members for the role-plays to evaluate the effectiveness of the activities.

Specifically, I identified two questions on the role-play post-tests that seemed most likely to answer the question of how empathy was cultivated, and I reviewed all responses to those questions, looking for connections between empathy, perspective taking, and particular components of the role-play. I designed interview questions with the objective of discovering elements of the role-plays that facilitated the students' connection with their characters (as a reminder, I interviewed students who had demonstrated empathy with their character or other characters), and I reviewed the

interviews to identify those elements. I searched for key words in reflection papers, such as ‘empathy’ ‘connection’ or ‘perspective,’ that would help me to identify empathy and role-play components that may have assisted with its cultivation. Finally, I observed and listened to hours of audio and video recordings, identifying times when a student seemed to be connecting with their own or another character in a simulated meeting or when a student reported such a connection in a debriefing session, in an effort to better understand what was occurring in role-play activities that cultivated empathy in some students. From this research, I gained a greater understanding of how particular elements of role-play, such as the inclusion of narrative activities and the authentic performance of characters, contribute to increased empathy in participants with the conflict parties represented in a role-play.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

In Chapter One I have provided the contextual information and conceptual development needed to understand the origins of the research questions and the path of this project. Central to this research is the concept of empathy, which I describe both as cognitive and affective, dynamic, and developed through experiences and interactions with others. In a definition that fits with my findings, Jordan characterizes empathy as a "cognitive-affective experience of joining in understanding, a feeling-resonance that leads to a more differentiated understanding of self, other, and relationship" (1997).

In Chapter Two I offer an in-depth study of the concept of empathy, tracing its roots and exploring its meaning, as well as considering its place in the CAR field. In this chapter, I examine the types of empathy found in the literatures of multiple fields of

study, and I consider the ways in which they are engaged by CAR scholars and practitioners. In this research, I am primarily concerned with situational and relational empathy, and in this chapter I will explain and defend those selections. The final purpose of this chapter is to explore ways in which empathy may be cultivated.

In Chapter Three I describe my research project, beginning with the questions that shaped the study, and I present my research methods, including my approaches to data collection and data analysis.

Chapter Four is a survey of role-plays as a pedagogical tool, particularly in the CAR field, but in other fields, as well. I review the literature on connections between role-play and empathy, and I consider best practices for role-plays when the cultivation of empathy is an objective of the activity.

In Chapters Five and Six I present my key findings, based on empirical research. In Chapter Five I demonstrate connections between narrative activities and empathy in role-play, and in Chapter Six I present evidence that the performance element of role-play activities contributes to the cultivation of empathy.

Finally, in Chapter Seven I offer concluding thoughts on the use of role-play in empathy cultivation, academic and practical implications for the CAR field, and possibilities for further research.



## Chapter Two: Empathy and Its Role in Conflict Resolution

“I wish that for just one time  
You could stand inside my shoes  
And just for that one moment  
I could be you”  
Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Bob Dylan

Empathy has become a popular concept in public discourse. From President Obama invoking it when discussing desired qualities in Supreme Court nominees in 2009, to multiple recent books including de Waal’s *The Age of Empathy* and Rifkin’s *The Empathic Civilization*, it is ubiquitous. The discovery of mirror neurons supports the idea that we are “soft-wired” to be empathic, and Rifkin argues that without empathy, society is destined to fail (Rifkin, 2009; Slevin, 2009; Waal, 2009)

The word *empathy* first appeared in 1909 when psychologist Edward B. Titchener translated it from the German *Einfühlungsvermögen* (lit. feeling into). Key to the phenomenon of empathy is the ability of an individual to access "the embodied subjective experience of another" (Throop, 2010, p. 772). Scholars from various disciplines have offered multiple definitions of empathy. Psychologist Carl Rogers wrote that to empathize is

To perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. Thus, it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased and so forth (1959, p. 210).

Throop's and Rogers' conceptualization of empathy captures its essence, which is the experience of a moment or set of moments as if one was a person other than oneself.

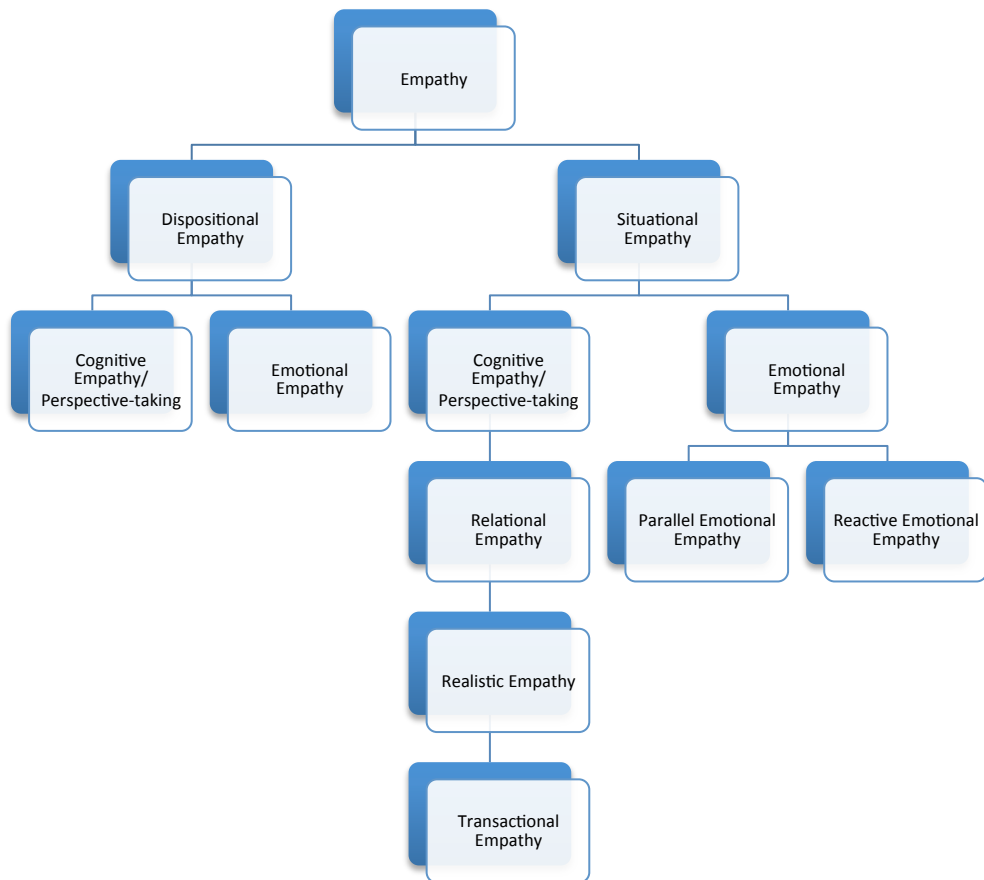
This chapter chronicles the birth and evolution of empathy as a concept in scholarly literature generally, and in the CAR field in particular. In this chapter I respond to critiques of empathy and I develop a conceptualization of empathy that I propose is closer to what we mean by it in the CAR field than concepts with which the field has previously worked. This conceptualization informs my analysis of empathy cultivation through role-play and therefore is crucial to the chapters that follow. Finally, I explore the ways in which empathy is cultivated.

### **The Birth and Evolution of Empathy**

From empathy's beginnings with Titchener's creation of the word, it has presented challenges and has been assigned a variety of meanings, from Rogers' very specific and detailed understanding of the concept to much more nuanced descriptions by later scholars. In the broadest terms, to empathize is to understand the thoughts and feelings of another. Some scholars describe empathy as taking the perspective of another, as "putting

oneself in another's shoes" and feeling an emotion with someone (Frei, 1985; Snow, 2000).

The field of psychology has done the most work in the area of creating empathy typologies. Perhaps most importantly, distinctions have been identified between cognitive and emotional empathy.



**Figure 1 Empathy Flow Chart**

Fig. 1 organizes various types of empathy that have been identified in the literature. *Cognitive empathy* is most closely associated with perspective-taking, while affective, or emotional, empathy occurs when one perceives and resonates with the emotional state of another (Duan & Hill, 1996, p. 262; Gerarda Brown, 2012, p. 195; Jordan, 1997, p. 344). *Emotional empathy* is typically understood as the vicarious experience of another person's emotional state, or what Stephan and Finlay identify as *parallel emotional empathy* (1999, p. 730). By contrast, *reactive emotional empathy* is an emotional response that does not mirror what the other is feeling and is associated with pity or sympathy (Stephan & Finlay, 1999, p. 730). This is an important distinction because one may feel sorry for the plight of another without identifying in any way with that plight; without that identification, the feeling *with* rather than feeling *for*, empathy is not present. While such categories as 'cognitive' and 'emotional' may appear to be discrete, in reality it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. There is widespread, if not universal, agreement that empathy contains both emotional and cognitive elements (Keen, 2006, p. 208), while some argue that an emotional connection is a requirement, not simply an option, for the presence of empathy (Deutsch, 2006, p. 61; Halpern, 2001, p. 69).

The discovery of mirror neurons by neuroscientists presents evidence that we are biologically wired to be empathetic at birth and that feeling what others feel (hunger, sadness, joy, etc.) is a natural human activity (Iacoboni, 2009). Mirror neurons are cells in our brains that "make us feel the suffering or the pain of the other person" by reading facial expressions (Iacoboni, 2009, p. 5). In his book, *Mirroring People*, Iacoboni argues

that research on mirror neurons concludes that these cells not only enable individuals to experience what another is feeling, but also to understand the other's intentions. Other scholars argue, however, that mirror neurons reveal very little about intentions (Borg, 2007).

In addition to the fields of psychology and neuroscience, the medical field has studied empathy rather extensively in efforts to improve relationships between patients and medical professionals. In her book, *From Detached Concern to Empathy: Humanizing Medical Practice*, Halpern offers an alternative model for doctors' interactions with patients to the existing models of 'detached cognition' or 'sympathetic merging' (2001). She introduces the idea of empathic imagination and argues that imagination helps to bridge the divide between one's own experiences and the experiences of others and it facilitates new understanding. Such imagination does not arise internally, Halpern contends, but develops relationally by way of emotional connections and efforts to understand another person (2001, pp. 87–88). Imagination of this sort seems to be dependent upon one's own lived experiences, the nature of the relationship with whom one is attempting to empathize (the degree to which it supports open sharing of emotions, for example) and minimal social and cultural differences that may frustrate the accuracy of the imagined experience (Halpern, 2001, p. 88).

Halpern also introduces the idea that what distinguishes empathy from similar concepts, such as sympathy, is that empathy requires understanding *why* another is thinking or feeling a particular way. As an example, she offers a scenario in which a cancer patient is angry after realizing his doctor has made some superficial errors because

he worries that this might indicate she is also making errors in his treatment. Halpern writes,

merely labeling the patient's feeling could also cause the doctor to sympathize with the patient's anger without really understanding it, and doing that could make the patient feel patronized. In contrast, the physician who can see the fear of negligent cancer treatment behind the patient's apparently overly angry reaction at a minor incident will be more effective. The understanding involved in clinical empathy is not observing that, as a matter of fact, a patient is in an emotional state, but noticing what is salient for the patient from within her emotional perspective. (2001, p. 70)

To link this to the idea of empathic imagination, a physician in this circumstance might begin by asking herself to imagine what might be the source of the patient's anger, given the circumstances and what the doctor knows about the patient's concerns.

Although the doctor may have the opportunity to ask questions of the patient to learn more about the source of the anger, empathic imagination allows the doctor to move beyond concluding that the patient is angry because the doctor made a minor mistake.

Multiple anthropologists examined empathy in their field in the November 2010 issue of *American Ethnologist*. In that issue, Throop writes of the vicissitudes of empathy, the "dynamic and, at times, fleeting ways that empathy is realized, recognized, and enacted within the ever-shifting attunements, memories, emotions, desires, fantasies, and interests that constitute, for all individuals, the very fabric of our conscious life in time" (2010, p. 773). For Throop, empathy is a human process, affected by all that makes

us human. In this piece, Throop studies empathy as he comes to grips with the death of a friend and, shortly afterward, he spends time with another friend who is having a similar experience, losing a friend to cancer, on the island of Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia. Thus, he explores empathy "in the context of loss, mourning, and ethnographic efforts at sense making..." through his own attempts to empathize with a friend in a different, though somewhat familiar, cultural context (Throop, 2010, p. 773).

As anthropologists, the scholars contributing to this issue are primarily interested in expressions of cross-cultural empathy, and they write of its challenges (Hollan, 2008; Hollan & Throop, 2008; Throop, 2010). Throop describes some of these failed attempts - moments when he thought he was empathizing, but later realized he had misunderstood the meaning of the experience. He writes, "Moments of empathic connection, it seems, may be quite often fleeting and elusive" (Throop, 2010, p. 777). The idea of empathy as 'moments of connection' strongly influences my understanding of the concept. Empathy requires effort, but even when one is really striving to make an empathic connection and to fully understand what another is thinking and feeling, sometimes one is successful and sometimes not. Sometimes it happens briefly and other times it is sustained for longer periods. At times the connection is clear and other times it is questionable if one's understanding of another is accurate. Conceptualizing empathy this way highlights its fluid and relational nature.

In "On the Verge: Phenomenology and Empathic Unsettlement," Shuman, a folklorist, develops the idea of 'empathic unsettlement,' building upon the work of LaCapra, who coined the term (LaCapra, 1999; Shuman, 2011). She does so in the

context of disability discourses, and specifically, a well-known allegory titled, "Welcome to Holland," which is meant to cultivate empathy. "Welcome to Holland" is designed to reach parents of children with disabilities; it describes the joyful expectation that comes with preparing for the birth of a child by comparing it to preparing for a long awaited trip to Italy, and she describes the pain and loss that accompany the realization that the child is not as the parents imagined, which she compares to an unexpected landing in Holland instead of Italy. Shuman writes that, "...the story acknowledges that these parents will not or cannot completely forget their preconceptions and expectations. They will forever be of two minds, knowing one world and inhabiting another" (2011, p. 153). This is what she describes as empathic unsettlement, "a willingness to live on a precipice of continuing unsettling realities" (Shuman, 2011, p. 153).

Empathic unsettlement highlights the limits of empathy and serves as a reminder that there is difference - the amount of which varies - between the empathizer and the one with whom they are empathizing. The unsettlement is experienced, Shuman argues, as the limits of understanding are recognized. She writes, "It situates the unsettlement in the witness/listener/ethnographer's position as someone who not only recognizes (rather than erases) difference but also recognizes how empathetic practices participate in defining (or entextualizing) others" (Shuman, 2011, p. 168) Shuman engages with the concept of empathy primarily as a skeptic who is keenly aware of its promises and limitations. Unsettlement seems like an especially appropriate way of approaching a concept like empathy. Why shouldn't one feel unsettled when attempting to do something as bold as imagining what another is thinking or feeling?



As one explores the various types of empathy that have been identified by scholars, overlap begins to emerge with related concepts such as sympathy, pity, compassion and perspective taking. Is empathy totally distinct from these other concepts or do they constitute empathy? Perhaps both are true. Compassion, for example, is defined as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it," while empathy is defined as "the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions." Clearly compassion and empathy are similar, but while compassion requires consciousness, empathy demands understanding. Understanding does not exist in the absence of consciousness, however, so it is likely that one who is empathizing also experiences feelings of compassion. Another difference is that empathy is not limited to understanding another's distress or suffering. Those are possible experiences with which one might empathize, but there are many others, including joy, frustration, and anger. Finally, empathy may or may not evoke a desire to do something to change the experience of another. (In fact, this is related to a critique of empathy - that it has the potential to be used for good or harmful purposes - that will be addressed later in this chapter.)

Another concept related to empathy, perspective taking, is familiar to the CAR field (D. W. Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2006, p. 80; Krauss & Morsella, 2006, p. 150; Sandy, 2006, pp. 376, 381). In fact, it is more common for scholars and practitioners to use the language of perspective taking than the language of empathy. Perspective taking is a cognitive act that requires one to understand another on an intellectual, rather than an emotional level. If one takes the perspective of another, she understands what the

other is thinking, and why, and how the other views a particular phenomenon, but not necessarily how the other *feels* about the phenomenon or experience. Many scholars refer to this as the cognitive element of empathy. Noce, who has written about empathy in the practice of mediation, limits her exploration of empathy to its cognitive side. She writes,

My focus will be on *cognitive empathy*... Based on the definitions and examples Bush and Folger offer, and their frequent use of the term "perspective-taking" as a synonym for recognition, I situate efforts by a mediator to support inter-party recognition in the transformative orientation within the cognitive, rather than the affective, dimension of empathy. (1999, pp. 280–281)

She focuses on cognitive empathy because she believes it to be the best fit for the processes associated with transformative mediation, but affective or emotional empathy is effectively eliminated from the discussion (Della Noce, 1999, pp. 281–282).

Perspective taking, then, seems to be both a distinct concept and an element of empathy. It is understood to be solely a cognitive process through which one enhances understanding of another's perspective. While it can be useful to create such clear boundaries between cognitive and emotional facets, what happens when one's perspective is emotional? Even Della Noce acknowledges that, "cognitive and affective elements of empathy very likely influence each other in ways not yet known" (1999, p. 281). It may be neater to classify perspective taking as purely cognitive and to associate it with empathy as the cognitive element, but it is unlikely that the distinctions are quite so neat.

## **Empathy in CAR**

The ability to empathize is strained when those with whom we are attempting to empathize differ starkly from us, and it is especially strained when conflict emerges. Thus, practitioners in the CAR field have long recognized the need to develop methods for encouraging parties in conflict to try to empathize with one another, or at least to begin to understand the other party's perspective (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Broome, 1991, 2009). A number of scholars have been instrumental in developing an understanding of empathy that is more appropriate for the CAR field than the traditional understanding from the field of psychology, which emphasizes the one directional empathy of a therapist for her patient. Broome writes that, "Applications of such an approach were limited in conflict settings, in which a one-way approach to understanding was insufficient to meet the demands brought by the complexities and constantly evolving dynamics of parties trapped in historical animosities, social divisions, psychological anxieties, and political power issues" (2009, p. 185).

Despite the recognition by many of the importance of empathy, the field is lacking a clear understanding of it, which is unsurprising considering that the meaning of empathy is a source of scholarly disagreement. In the CAR field, most empathy-related research centers on the importance of developing empathy among parties in conflict as a crucial piece of conflict resolution (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Broome, 1991, 2009; Deutsch, 2006; Frei, 1985). Cognitive abilities are emphasized, and studies of this nature focus on the degree to which parties in conflict can learn to understand the perspective of other parties (Belman & Flanagan, 2010). Role-playing is readily acknowledged as a tool

for developing and increasing empathy, and particularly for teaching students to empathize (Deutsch, 2006; Gerarda Brown, 2012).

Empathy is integral to multiple conflict resolution processes, including dialogue, mediation and problem solving workshops. All of these require parties in conflict to carefully consider the views of others and to varying degrees, to gain a better understanding of others' thoughts, feelings and perspectives. While some CAR scholars and practitioners refer to empathy explicitly, others invoke terms with similar meanings. Two of the most common are perspective taking and recognition. As previously discussed, perspective taking is described as a cognitive process and a component of empathy. Bush and Folger write of recognition in the context of shifts in a mediation process and describe it as, "*letting go* - however briefly or partially - of one's focus on self and becoming interested in the perspective of the other party as such, concerned about the situation of the other as a fellow human being, not as an instrument for fulfilling one's own needs" (1994, p. 97). Recognition, then, does not require that an individual fully understands the perspective of another, but makes an attempt to understand and exhibits genuine interest in and concern for another. Bush and Folger describe empathy as "the capacity to consider and understand the situations and perspectives of others" (2005, p. 250). Like others, they focus on the cognitive element of empathy.

CAR scholars have identified various types of empathy, but they are not always well understood throughout the field. Smith and Betancourt, both writing in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, applied the term *realistic empathy*, coined by

White, to conflict and negotiation, and to U.S. intervention in the Middle East (Betancourt, 2004; Smith, 2004). White defines empathy as a realistic understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others, and he believes it to be cognitive in nature. White contends, "Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question" (1984). Betancourt describes realistic empathy as a "chess player's type of empathy" and, indeed, it seems to be focused primarily on a cognitive understanding of another's motives for a particular purpose (2004, p. 370). Smith argues that realistic empathy helps make sense of different perspectives, such as how one person's "terrorist" is another's "freedom fighter," but fails to explain how that happens (2004, p. 337).

Broome developed the concept of *relational empathy*, which he describes as the co-creation of meaning by participants in an interpersonal or group setting (1991, 2009). Drawing upon the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer, Broome advocates for a conceptualization of empathy that "is not viewed as a 'product', but as a 'tensional event' occurring between the communicators" (1991). He argues that this approach to empathy is more appropriate in a conflict setting, in which tension-producing differences between individuals are a hallmark.

Della Noce applied the idea of relational empathy to mediation processes and distinguishes it from *transactional empathy*, which she defines as empathy that is cultivated in the pursuit of a mediated agreement (1999). She associates relational empathy with transformative mediation and transactional empathy with problem-solving mediation (Della Noce, 1999). Furthermore, she situates both relational empathy and

transactional empathy in the realm of cognitive empathy; relational empathy is associated with a relational worldview and transactional empathy is associated with a transactional worldview, and she maintains that the type of cognitive empathy that is cultivated in a mediation process depends on the mediator's worldview (Della Noce, 1999).

Bowers and Moffett, in one of the only books explicitly addressing empathy in conflict resolution, explore how empathy works in mediation based on Rosenberg's model of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) (2012). The NVC mediation model employs a process in which a mediator surfaces needs of parties in conflict and asks each to empathize with the needs expressed by others. Like others, they describe empathy as possessing both cognitive and affective elements; they use the terms 'cognitive-empathy' (or perspective-taking in its place) and 'affective-empathy.' They employ what is primarily a Rogerian, and thus therapeutic, definition of empathy. They write that, "Rogers uses empathy to help the client express what the client is experiencing inside based on the client's understanding and expression" (Bowers & Moffett, 2012, p. 89). The therapist affirms an understanding of the client's experience, which is understood to be an expression of empathy.

Bowers and Moffett distinguish empathy from sympathy and from other processes, such as active listening. They define empathy as "nonjudgmental understanding of another person's perceptions and viewpoint" (Bowers & Moffett, 2012, p. 89). The use of 'nonjudgmental' diverges from most other scholars by implying that one can experience objectivity. In applying this idea to the NVC model, Bowers and Moffett write that, "NVC empathy goes beyond the practice of active listening to include

guessing the feelings and needs of the other person even when these feelings and needs have not been explicitly articulated" (2012, pp. 89–90).

### **Approaches to Empathic Capacity**

Additional elements of empathy serve to distinguish between one's innate capacity to empathize, and that which is developed as a result of intentional efforts to cultivate or increase empathy. *Dispositional empathy* describes existing levels of willingness and ability to empathize; it is not entirely innate, but a result of an individual's biological makeup and social experiences. This is empathy that exists in the absence of inducements. By contrast, *induced empathy* is empathy derived from experimental manipulation or intervention. Empathy of this sort is the result of intentional efforts to cultivate empathic responses (Belman & Flanagan, 2010).

Induced empathy is most relevant to my research, as I studied empathy cultivated through role-play activities. However, in early iterations of the role-play activities, pre-tests and post-tests designed by the UELP's internal evaluator included 14 statements designed to assess dispositional empathy on a four-point Likert scale. These statements in the pre-tests and post-tests were later replaced by questions intended to measure students' understanding of the thoughts and feelings of parties represented in the role-plays. Of the statements, the following three most directly measure levels of dispositional empathy:

- I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes.
- I am good at predicting how someone will feel.
- I can tune into how someone else feels rapidly and intuitively.

Through reviewing the two semesters (Fall 2011 and Spring 2012) in which these measures of dispositional empathy were included in pre-tests and post-tests, I found that there were no major differences among students within classes. Most students selected the responses “slightly agree” or “strongly agree” to the relevant statements, both in pre-tests and in post-tests. One class, however, was an exception in that many more students selected the responses “slightly disagree” or “strongly disagree” to the relevant statements in the pre-test. This anomaly occurred in my CONF 330 course (Community, Group, and Organizational Conflict Analysis and Resolution) in Spring 2012. To my knowledge, there was nothing unusual about the class makeup in relation to other classes included in my study. Most students in the class were majoring in Conflict Analysis and Resolution or a related social science, and female students outnumbered male students.

Interestingly, the post-test for this class revealed that students’ responses indicated higher levels of empathy. For example, in the pre-test 52 percent of students selected the response “strongly disagree” to the statement, “I find it easy to put myself in somebody else’s shoes.” By contrast, only 11 percent of students selected the same response on the post-test. Although this class represents the most dramatic shift, most classes reflected higher overall levels of empathy in post-tests, measured by responses to the statements identified in this section. It was not an objective of the role-play activities to increase students’ dispositional empathy, and the extent to which that did or did not happen was not the focus of my research. However, given the findings of other studies linking role-play to increased empathy, it is not surprising that I had similar findings.



Nevertheless, my study was designed to understand how empathy is cultivated through role-play activities, which makes it a study that explores induced, rather than dispositional, empathy.

### **Challenges to Empathy**

"I know how you feel." Most people have heard that at some point in their lives and thought, "No, you don't." As an ultimately interior experience, empathy presents challenges and risks. Knowing how another person feels, understanding another person's perspective, and knowing why someone feels the way they do, are far from easy tasks. Even when one has had a similar experience to another - falling in love, for example – the individual experience is unique. The age, history, and cultural norms of the people involved are conditions that may affect the experience.

Born of our desire to connect with and understand others, empathy is well intentioned, but good intentions don't always equal good deeds. What could be wrong, though, with seeking to understand what fellow human beings are thinking and feeling? It is an act or series of acts that seems to illustrate the best of the human spirit. Programs designed to tap into that spirit, such as anti-bullying initiatives, use empathy as a foundation. One example is the program Roots of Empathy, which brings a "loving parent and a baby to classrooms to help children learn to understand the perspective of others" (Szalavitz, 2010). Nothing is wholly good, though, and critiques of empathy challenge those who champion it to carefully consider its limitations and potential ethical risks.

Most importantly, the act of empathizing creates a position of privilege for the empathizer. When one empathizes, she adopts the experience of another in an attempt to make an empathic connection. One problem is that one rarely has the opportunity to engage in deep questioning with the person with whom she is empathizing, so the degree to which stories of experiences that prompt empathy match the stories of the one who has had the experiences is largely unknown. However, in *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, Shuman argues that the problem she identifies as the critique of empathy is "not the accuracy of the representations but the relationships between listeners and tellers produced by those representations" (2005, p. 25). In this relationship, Shuman contends that empathizing offers benefits to the listeners that are not available to the tellers. "Empathy puts in place the possibility that, through the luxury of storytelling, others can indirectly experience that person's suffering for their personal or collective enlightenment without enduring those tragedies, or if they have endured tragedies, they are offered transcendence through compassion toward others" (Shuman, 2005, p. 8).

The idea that some people experience tragedy and others gain enlightenment and transcendence through the experience of listening to the stories of those who have lived the tragedy raises ethical concerns. It is particularly problematic when stories have traveled great distances and reach listeners who will never meet the tellers. Shuman writes that, "Narrative creates the person as a character who can stand for a larger human experience," and offers multiple examples, including political junk-mail narratives that cultivate empathy through personal narratives in order to make the problem "real" and

garner donations (2005, pp. 124–125). An example more relevant to this study is the use of narratives in developing role-play activities to engage students in a personal way with the primary stakeholders in a particular conflict. The primary objective of the activity is educational, though some students are moved to act in the wake of the role-play. For example, a few students got involved in efforts to limit or end MTM after participating in one of the role-plays. The extent to which that occurred was not part of this research, and it is only known through communication with students who chose to share such information.

In describing "moments of connection and disconnection," Throop identifies the hit or miss nature of empathy. In the story he tells of spending time with his friend who is experiencing the loss of a loved one, shortly after Throop experienced the same sort of loss, he is initially certain that he understands what his friend is feeling, and why, but he later learns that he was mistaken about some of those feelings. Do such mistakes cause harm? Potentially, yes. If Throop were to act in accordance with what he thought his friend was feeling, he might say or do something that causes harm. In this story, however, he realizes his mistake through conversation. That recognition highlights the importance of doing one's best to check in, directly or indirectly, with those with whom one is empathizing. Disconnection in itself is not the exploitation of which Shuman writes and warns, and it does not necessarily lead to exploitation. What makes a difference is that one is concerned about getting it right, while recognizing that part of being human is getting things wrong at times. When empathy occurs between people in a close relationship, the opportunities for checking in are usually plentiful. Although it requires

more creativity to know if one is empathizing accurately with someone outside of a relationship, it is possible.

A significant challenge to studying empathy is detecting when it is present. How may one claim with certainty to feel what another is feeling? As a researcher, how can one know that an individual fully understands the experience of another individual? Empathy is a complex phenomenon, and in attempting to reduce it to easily identifiable components, much of the richness of empathy as a lived experience is lost. The multiple approaches to empathy that I discovered in the literature revealed its complexity and helped me to better understand it in the context of conflict resolution.

### **New Conceptual Understanding of Empathy for CAR**

In accordance with the predominant view in the various literatures on empathy, this study embraces the following conceptual understanding of empathy: (a) It is both cognitive and affective; to empathize one must understand the experience of another, including the emotions associated with the experience. Empathy requires an emotional connection (Deutsch, 2006; Gerarda Brown, 2012). Deutsch characterizes this blending of cognitive and emotional empathy as "the fullest level" of empathy (2006, p. 61); (b) Empathy is experiential and relational. It is cultivated through interactions with others, and specifically through the experiences that stretch one to understand another. Dispositional empathy, in particular, is thought of as a static ability or capacity. By this measure, one either possesses or lacks the capacity to empathize. There is a great deal of evidence, however, to support the idea that empathy can be taught (Monroe, 2006; Pinderhughes, 1979; Shapiro et al., 2004; van Rooij, 2012). More importantly, this

research is not concerned with empathy in the abstract (assuming that is possible), but with empathy cultivated through intersubjective experiences; and (c) Empathy is dynamic and experienced as moments of connection. One's experience of empathy frequently moves through moments of connection and disconnection, from "feelings of mutual understanding, attunement, and compassion to feelings of confusion, misalignment, and singularity..." (Throop, 2010, p. 771). When one attempts to empathize, it is not always successful, and sometimes it is not even possible to know if the attempt has succeeded until a later time. Through reflexivity, however, one can critically examine efforts to empathize, can identify moments of connection and disconnection, and can begin to better understand what is happening in those moments.

In my research I have found that what often begins as a cognitive exercise, with students attempting to understand the party they are portraying in the role-play by studying a description of the character and by conducting research, evolves into an emotional connection as the student more fully embodies the character. Like Throop, I understand empathy as fluid and dynamic; just as one may move between moments of connection and disconnection while attempting to empathize, one may also move between cognitive and affective connections. What is crucial is that there is a connection with another person and that there are new insights gained from attempting to think and feel as if one were another person.

In the role-play activities that form the core of my research and in conflict resolution practice, empathy is developed mutually as parties strive to better understand one another. In role-play, students portray parties in a conflict trying to empathize with

other students in the same position. This is distinct from empathy cultivation that is primarily focused on the increased understanding of one party. To draw from Broome, this is an example of relational empathy in that the group setting facilitates co-creation of meaning (2009).

### **Empathy in Narrative and Performance**

From novels to films, stories invite us to enter the worlds of others and imagine what it is like to inhabit those worlds. Recent research on literary fiction, in particular, demonstrates a correlation between reading well-crafted stories and empathizing (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”, Suzanne Keen contends that novelists "express belief in narrative empathy's power to change the minds and lives of readers" (2006, p. 215). Keen identifies two features of narratives most commonly associated with empathy, character identification and narrative situation (2006, p. 215). Some of the most important aspects of character identification include the flatness or roundness of a character and a character's motives (2006, p. 218). Round characters are "capable of surprising us in a convincing way," while flat characters tend to be "easily comprehended and recalled." Both seem to invite empathy in different situations.

Much of empathy is unseen; it inhabits one's mind and may only be accessed in that space, if at all, through neurological testing. Yet, empathy is an embodied experience recognized in physical acts. Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre are two performance tools used to address conflicts through the cultivation of empathy. Playback Theatre is "an original form of improvisational theatre in which audience or group members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot" (“Playback

Theatre,” 2015). It has been used by Palestinians to tell their stories, and it has been used to address bullying in schools. Theatre of the Oppressed, which includes Forum Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Image Theatre, and Legislative Theatre, uses theatre to create social change. I discuss Playback Theatre in greater detail in Chapter Six.

In two volumes of *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, scholars and practitioners offer multiple examples of theatre and other forms of performance used to advance peacebuilding efforts (Cohen, Gutierrez Varea, & Walker, 2011; Cohen, Varea, & Walker, 2011). Whether through scripted or improvisational performances, interveners have used various types of performance to address conflicts. As with narratives, performances also facilitate the cultivation of empathy. Those who create theatre want the audience to connect with the performers and see the world as the characters in the performance see it. They strive to make the audience feel what the characters are feeling; that is, to empathize with the characters. Most of us have experienced this when a performance touches us deeply and we find ourselves crying, even though we know the story is fictional. When we experience that level of empathy, it does not matter if that with which we empathize is fictional or 'real.'

**Embodied empathy.** Role-play activities offer participants an opportunity to embody the character they portray in the role-play. In “Embodied Conflict Resolution: Resurrecting Roleplay-Based Curricula Through Dance,” Alexander and LeBaron promote dance as an effective form of experiential education and what they call ‘embodied conflict resolution’ (2013). They argue that traditional role-plays fail to prompt the kind of embodiment that participants experience through an activity such as

dance. Although role-play participants must engage their bodies to take part in the activity, the extent to which they engage and embody their character varies a great deal. Dance may be more likely to prompt embodied engagement, but if an instructor is working with the same pool of participants, it is likely that one will still see variation, from enthusiastic to lukewarm participation. Role-play is an embodied activity, but the extent to which participants fully embody their characters and demonstrate empathy through embodiment depends on multiple factors, including participants' level of comfort with the activity, ability to relate to their character, and group dynamics within the activity.

### **The Role of Imagination**

Imagination and creativity are elements of narrative development, performance, and empathy. The amount of information one has about a character, a situation or a group with which one is empathizing varies, but some degree of imagination is required to place oneself in an unfamiliar space. This may happen explicitly, by invoking the phrase, "I can imagine what it's like..." or it may be unspoken. Interestingly, the opposite expression of that sentiment ("I can't imagine what it's like") frequently reveals an effort on the part of the speaker to understand an experience. Such a declaration may indicate that the speaker is struggling with the task, or even that she has given up on the prospect of empathizing, but not that she made no attempt.

In *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding*, Lederach contends the creativity and imagination are at the heart of conflict resolution practice. He argues that to be a successful practitioner, one must be able to imagine that which does not yet



exist (2010). That is to say, a solution to a conflict is often something that has not been attempted or even considered in the past. Rather than just a skill worth cultivating for its own sake, learning to empathize with parties in conflict requires imagination and creativity, which are skills that may benefit students later as conflict resolution practitioners.

## **Conclusion**

Empathy is a complex concept, which has been identified as important to the practices of understanding and resolving conflict, but it has not been studied extensively or conceptualized in depth in the CAR field. A key finding in the study of empathy in other fields, primarily in the field of psychology, is that it comprises both cognitive and affective elements. This understanding of empathy has been adopted by some CAR scholars, including Deutsch, who refers to the combination of cognitive and affective empathy as “the fullest level of empathy” (2006, p. 61). Perspective taking, which is considered to be the cognitive element of empathy, is a skill that is promoted in the CAR field and is an important component of key conflict resolution practices such as facilitated dialogue.

In addition to the presence of both cognitive and affective engagement, other important findings from my own research and the research of other scholars include the dynamic and relational nature of empathy. In particular, Broome’s work on relational empathy and Throop’s and Foster’s work on empathy as a dynamic process, resulting in fleeting moments of connection, provided me with a richer understanding of empathy (Broome, 2009; Foster, 2010; Throop, 2010). The process of cultivating empathy is not

without critics; a strong critique centers on the question of who benefits from the practice of empathizing. I share this concern. Through the course of my research I discovered several empathy programs and proposed programs, such as an empathy library in which people can engage in conversations with people they would be unlikely to encounter otherwise, that raised ethical concerns. Moreover, empathizing with anyone, especially with someone who is quite different from oneself, presents a great challenge. I maintain, however, that its relevance to the CAR field makes it necessary to understand and engage, and that doing so has the potential to benefit the field and conflict resolution practice.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

This study emerged from my observations of role-play activities in CAR classrooms as an instructor and role-play developer, and from insights with regard to role-play as a method of cultivating empathy. As an instructor, I noticed that many students participating in role-play activities demonstrated and/or reported not only increased knowledge of the conflict highlighted in the activity, but also a better sense of what life is like for the parties embroiled in the conflicts featured in the classroom role-plays I used in my classroom. I thought of this primarily as students improving their perspective-taking skills, which is a common objective of role-play activities. As a creator of role-play activities through my work with the UELP, and as a scholar, I reviewed the literature on role-play and discovered that role-plays are commonly used as an empathy-building tool, and that while empathy and perspective taking are linked, they are not the same. As I moved deeper into the literature, I also discovered that although empathy is addressed in the CAR field, conceptualizations of empathy vary greatly, and it has not been studied extensively. Empathy is assumed to be positive, and a useful skill. Furthermore, almost no attention is given to the question of how empathy is cultivated. When this question is addressed, it is typically in a general context; i.e. role-play is a useful tool for fostering the development of empathy.

In this study, I addressed two gaps in the CAR field. First, I provided a conceptualization of empathy for the field by synthesizing extensive reviews of multiple literatures on empathy and insights gleaned from my own research. Second, I tackled the question of how empathy is cultivated, using role-play as the site for my inquiry and conducting in-depth analysis to learn how role-plays induce empathy. I presented a new conceptualization of empathy in Chapter Two, which is experiential and relational, both affective and cognitive, and dynamic. In Chapters Four and Five I will address the second question through the presentation of my research findings.

I collected multiple sets of data for this study, including audio and video recordings, responses to exam questions, responses to reflection paper prompts, pre and post tests, and interviews with students who participated in one of the two role-play activities at the center of the research. Each set was collected to contribute to my understanding of how role-play activities that simulate conflicts cultivate situational empathy in the role-play participants with the parties in conflict.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the two role-play activities that are central to my research. Familiarity with these activities is useful as a reference when reading the sections that follow. In the second section, I present the research questions that guided this study and explain why I focused on role-play as a site for examining empathy. In the third section, I provide details and rationale for each set of data I collected, as well as the purpose and usefulness of each set. Finally, in the fourth section, I describe my approaches to data analysis for each set, and I justify the approaches.

## **Role-Play Activities**

Two role-play activities constitute my research. Both are simulations of community conflicts and are set in the Appalachian region of the United States. In the activities, students portray members of the respective communities who are grappling with issues connected to the practice of MTM. Unlike traditional underground coal mining, MTM accesses coal in a mountain by removing its top, as the name suggests. It is a form of surface mining, but while some surface mining leaves the affected mountain relatively intact, MTM significantly alters the landscape of the mountain and the surrounding area by removing earth from the top of the mountain and depositing it in adjacent valleys (Palmer et al., 2010). Coal companies are required by law to restore MTM sites to their original state to the greatest extent possible, but environmentalist groups and others living in affected communities dispute claims by companies that restoration efforts work (Barry, 2001; Hirsch & Dukes, 2014).

Several existing environmental groups, such as the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and new organizations, such as Keeper of the Mountains, have opposed the practice of mountaintop mining, arguing that it pollutes the surrounding air and water and reduces, rather than increases, coal mining jobs because the practice is less labor intensive. Those who align with this perspective refer to the practice as mountaintop removal mining, a term that is rejected by the coal industry and its supporters. The industry claims that it complies with federal and state regulations and provides good jobs in an area that is economically depressed. Its supporters also point to coal mining's historic place in Appalachian traditions and culture.

This conflict, like many intractable disputes, has polarized communities affected by mountaintop mining, literally pitting neighbor against neighbor in some cases. Many miners and non-miners alike trace their ties to coal mining for generations. Such longstanding connections to mining – considered by many to be a way of life, and not simply a job – inspire strong emotional responses to perceived threats to its continuation. Those opposed to the practice of mountaintop mining display similar emotional responses tied to a social identity that prioritizes intact mountains and their place in Appalachian life. Many refer to the mountains and the natural beauty of the Appalachian region as gifts from God, implying that its destruction is a rejection of those gifts, while many who support mountaintop mining argue that God provided them with mountains and other natural resources to use as needed.

Health problems experienced by members of a community that are directly linked or perceived to be linked to coal mining may further exacerbate the conflict and divide communities. Although many whose health is negatively affected by mining are the miners themselves, many others who live near mining activities experience the health effects of contaminated air (primarily from coal dust) and water (Pond, Passmore, Borsuk, Reynolds, & Rose, 2008). In 2014 water in Charleston, West Virginia, which is not close to any mines, was contaminated and undrinkable for several days due to a spill in the Elk River of a toxic chemical used in the coal-washing process (Ghabra, 2015). Such health issues can be emotional and divisive because those who support mining tend to believe the ailments can be traced to sources other than the effects of mining, while

opponents of mining tend to view such health afflictions as a sort of ‘collateral damage’ that mining company executives are willing to accept.

This conflict, with its multiple stakeholders and virulent discourse, served well as the basis for a role-play in which increased perspective taking skills was a key learning objective. There is a great deal at stake in this conflict, so it felt important to students, in contrast with role-plays based on conflicts between roommates, for example. The emotional nature of the conflict challenged students as they strove to understand the parties’ deep connections with the land, the culture of coal mining, and religion, as well as the dynamics and narratives, such as poverty and a narrative of exploitation, that have shaped the parties’ lives. The challenges associated with simulating an aspect of this conflict made it ideal for cultivating empathy skills; had it been a conflict with less at stake and one with roles into which students could easily move, it would not have required students to develop a greater capacity for empathy.

The first role-play activity, titled *Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community* (see Appendix A for the full activity), is designed to run over two consecutive two and a half hour class meetings. In the SCAR's undergraduate program, it has been part of an upper-level course on community, group, and organizational conflicts. The second activity, titled *The Last Resort: Envisioning Change in an Appalachian Mining Community* (see Appendix B for the full activity), is designed to run as a six-week course in which undergraduate students engage in role-play for four consecutive two and a half hour class meetings. The following learning objectives inform the design of these activities:

- 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, they 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; and
- Apply theories, concepts, and frameworks presented in the course to the conflict dynamics that emerge in the simulated community meetings.

**Role-play I: *Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community.*** *Can We Drink the Water?* situated students as members of a rural community in West Virginia struggling to address a water contamination problem in the local elementary school. The source of the contamination was disputed; some blamed the coal mining industry, and mountaintop mining in particular, while others argued that it was a result of pollutants that had been washed into streams during recent heavy rains. In the meantime, children attending the school were



required to carry bottled water, which concerned parents and other members of the community. Multiple parties are represented in the simulation, and most had multiple conflicting interests. For example, one character was a parent who also worked for a local mine. The characters were designed to be gender neutral so that students were able to play the role in the gender with which they identified. Each student represented one of the following parties:

Harlie Mayford: Harlie is a coal miner and a parent with a child in the school that is experiencing water contamination. Harlie is torn between concerns for her/his child's health and concerns about the future her/his job. This role is designed to induce empathy by portraying Harlie as a complex character with legitimate worries about her/his ability to support a family. Harlie frequently comes to be seen as a person doing her/his best in very bad circumstances.

Jamie Ames: Jamie is the PTA president who called a meeting to discuss the water contamination at the school. S/he invited members of the community to attend the meeting. Jamie has a child in the school that is experiencing water contamination, and s/he has some relatives who are miners and others who are anti-mining activists. In the role-play, Jamie represents the many individuals in such communities with ties to multiple sides of the conflict.

Terry McAfree: Terry is a community resident who has the same water source as the school and therefore also has contaminated water. While Terry does not think of her/himself as an activist and is not necessarily opposed to mining, s/he is beginning to

take a more active role in addressing the issue of water contamination and is looking to longtime resident activists as examples.

Shane Silver: Shane is a young activist who is opposed to mountaintop mining. S/he is living in an encampment for activists in the community and is volunteering as a tutor in an after-school program. This role is designed to induce empathy by portraying Shane as a complex character who cares about the community, and especially the students whom he tutors, while opposing what s/he sees as destruction caused by the mining industry.

Denny Bruno: Denny is the school principal who comes from a family of coal miners and has a spouse who works in the regional office of a mining company. Denny is concerned about the well being of the students, but wants to maintain good relations with the coal industry, in part because the industry contributes money to a county school fund.

J.C. Settle: Pastor Settle is from North Carolina and is in the community for two weeks in advance of a planned Habitat for Humanity project in the spring. Pastor Settle is planning to bring member is her/his church for the project, and the group had been planning to eat lunch at the school each day while in the area. Pastor Settle is concerned about the impact of the contaminated water in the school on her/his plans, and s/he is concerned generally about the health and welfare of the community.

Each student was assigned one of these characters to portray in the role-play's simulated meetings. To prepare for the role-play, students received descriptions of their character and the conflict scenario one week before the simulation began (see Appendix A for role descriptions and conflict scenario). Once they had read these materials, they

completed a written journaling exercise in which they adopted the perspective of the person that they would represent in the role-play. In this assignment, students imagined what it would be like to experience a day as this person. They documented what they ate for meals, where they went during the day, who they saw, what they did, and how they felt about their experiences. This exercise was designed to initiate students' deepening identification with the character and to encourage the development of empathy (see Appendix C for the journaling exercise).

During the class session following the completion of this exercise, students learned more about conflicts associated with mountaintop coal mining through a lecture on the topic<sup>1</sup> and by viewing the documentary *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country*. The lecture was designed to help students understand the issues in this conflict and how they are framed by various stakeholders; the documentary viewing was intended to provide students with a sense of what the conflict looks like and how it affects relationships in a rural community. As a final piece of preparation, students meet for caucus sessions with classmates who are portraying the same character. During this meeting, all the students playing the role of Jamie Ames, for example, consider what his or her positions, interests and values would likely be, and discuss how Jamie would likely approach this conflict. The caucus sessions mimic real-life conflict, in which participants in resolution processes frequently confer with like-minded supporters. These sessions afforded students opportunities to compare experiences and to strategize.

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<sup>1</sup> The lecture, delivered by Dr. Susan Hirsch, is a video recording available online.

In the following class session, students conducted two simulated community meetings in groups that comprised one representative from each role. In the first meeting, members of the community were attending the monthly Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meeting to discuss the contaminated water. This meeting ran about 30 minutes and afforded parties an opportunity to learn who was interested in the issue, the positions of interested parties, and areas of agreement and disagreement. It was not always so tidy, and some groups spent the entire first meeting arguing about the practice of mountaintop coal mining or contesting the legitimacy of parties who came from outside the community. Between the first and second meetings, students met for debriefing sessions with other students who were playing the same role. In debriefing, students stepped out of role and discussed with fellow students what occurred in the meeting, how other parties reacted to them, and what they anticipated doing in the next meeting.

Before the second simulated meeting, students were informed by the instructor that an explosion in a nearby underground mine trapped several miners. The introduction of this development in the middle of the activity was designed to illustrate the dynamic nature of conflict and to compel students to reconsider their approach to the conflict in light of this new information. In the simulation time-line, the second meeting occurred one week after the first: the water contamination was an ongoing problem, no solution was found during the monthly PTA meeting, and the parties agreed it was not appropriate to wait until the next monthly PTA meeting. This meeting also ran for approximately 30 minutes and was followed by a final debriefing of the entire class. In this debriefing, led by the instructor, students again stepped out of role to discuss the meeting's dynamics

and explore different parties' approaches to the conflict. Through debriefing, students also had opportunities to reflect on elements of the activity that were surprising and to consider how the experience affected his or her view of the conflict. As a final assignment, students wrote either a reflection paper or answered an exam question aimed at reflection on the activity. In this assignment, students were tasked with considering what happened in the role-play activity and why, and connecting theories, concepts and frameworks from the respective course to the conflict and resolution attempts observed in the role-play.

**Role-play II: *The Last Resort: Envisioning Change in an Appalachian Mining Community.*** *The Last Resort* situated students in a small, fictional Appalachian city named Greenfield, where conflict had emerged in relation to potential changes in its economy. This city had traditionally depended heavily on the coal industry for its economy, but leaders in the community were considering alternatives as concerns about limited coal resources increased. In the simulation, the mayor of the city convened a group of community members representing various interests to discuss a proposal from a developer to build a resort near town. Throughout the activity, participants discussed general economic challenges in addition to the specific proposal to build the resort and its potential impact on the city. This activity was designed for a small group; five to nine students is an ideal size. The characters in this activity did not have names assigned to them; students selected a name for the character they would portray in the role-play. Each student represented one of the following parties:

Member of the local Chamber of Commerce: The member owns an auto parts business in Greenfield and favors economic expansion in the form of increased tourism based on the area's natural resources. S/he has friends and family who work in the mines but believes they don't understand that the mines will close eventually.

Local activist opposed to mountaintop coal mining: The activist has lived in Greenfield her/his whole life and was married to a coal miner who died 10 years ago. S/he co-founded an organization that supports alternative sources of energy, such as wind and solar. Her/his spouse was an underground miner, and s/he believes the current practice of mountaintop mining and the destruction of the mountains is immoral and economically unsound.

Mayor of Greenfield: The mayor grew up in Greenfield and returned shortly after attending college in Virginia. The mayor is in favor of the proposed resort, believing it will bring jobs and tourists to the community.

Manager of local mountaintop mine: The mine manager comes from a coal mining family and has worked in this mine for 25 years. The manager is concerned that anti-mining activists will use the development of a new resort as an opportunity to push their anti-mining agenda.

Developer interested in project in Greenfield: The developer is interested in building a resort just outside Greenfield and is concerned about the possibility of the expansion of mountaintop mining as well as contaminated water.

Nursing supervisor from local hospital: The nurse is part of a mining family, and her/his spouse works in a mine. Working as a health care provider, the nurse has seen the

health consequences of underground mining in particular on many who have worked in the mines. S/he is generally in favor of expanded economic opportunities that a resort might bring to the area, but s/he is concerned about the impact it could have on her/his spouse's job security.

Regional activist opposed to mountaintop coal mining: The regional activist's father and grandfather were coal miners, but s/he has been working against the practice of mountaintop mining for 12 years and is currently serving as the co-director of an anti-mountaintop mining organization. This activist does not live in Greenfield, but is interested in offering help to the community by providing examples of ways in which other Appalachian communities have shifted from dependence on coal mining to other resources as the basis of their economy.

Owner of local rafting company: The owner founded her/his rafting company eight years ago after moving to West Virginia from Colorado, and s/he is interested in the prospect of the nearby accommodations that the resort would provide. The owner does not have strong opinions on the issue of mountaintop mining, but is generally opposed to it because of its destructive nature.

The first part of this activity was similar to *Can We Drink the Water?* Students learned about the mountaintop mining conflict's key issues and stakeholders through a lecture on the topic, and they got a sense of the ways in which this conflict affects relationships and shapes community dynamics through viewing the documentary *Deep Down*. During the second through fifth class sessions, students spent the class period alternating between simulated meetings and debriefings. There were typically two

simulated meetings per class period, with the exception of the fifth meeting, in which the instructor and students engaged in a lengthy final debriefing. The mayor of Greenfield convened the meetings, and participants attended either because they had been invited by the mayor or had learned about the meetings through word of mouth and asked to join the group. Participants spent much of the meeting time discussing the proposed resort and how it might affect various segments of the community. The developer was concerned about the impact of nearby mountaintop coal mining on the resort, and in a simulated meeting, participants responded to concerns raised by the developer following a visit to the proposed site of the resort, where he discovered a thick layer of coal dust on his vehicle while it was parked at the site. In addition to the developer's visit to the resort site, other new information was introduced during the course of the activity. For example, in the middle of the simulation, students were informed of a state grant, intended for communities like theirs that are trying to broaden their economic base, for which they were eligible to apply.

After each class session students received a set of questions from the instructor that pertained to discussions that unfolded in the most recent session and anticipated upcoming discussions. Prior to the next class session, each student responded to the questions in writing and submitted responses to the instructor. The questions are designed to aid students in reflecting on the previous meeting and preparing for the next one. Students also had the opportunity to complete an extra credit assignment in which they developed questions that they would ask if they were to conduct an interview with a person represented by their character (for example, a student could interview a mayor of



an Appalachian city); they earned additional points if they conducted the interview. Upon completion of the role-play activity, students wrote a reflection paper based on questions designed to impel them to think deeply about why the meetings unfolded as they did, and to connect concepts, frameworks and theories of conflict to the simulation.

### **Restatement of Research Questions**

The questions below guided my research. I have listed each of them here, along with the data sets used to discover the answers to each question. Each data set is described in detail in the following section of this chapter.

1. What does empathy mean and how is it recognized in the CAR field?

Why is empathy development important for analysts and practitioners, and for CAR students, as nascent CAR scholars and practitioners?

Data: The answers to these questions were drawn from reviews of the treatment of empathy in multiple literatures, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, the medical field, and conflict analysis and resolution.

2. How are role-play activities used in CAR undergraduate classrooms to cultivate empathy for parties in conflict?

Data: This question was answered in part through a review of the CAR literature and in part from my own experiences and knowledge of the use of role-play in S-CAR and in other CAR academic programs.

3. To what extent and in what ways do role-play activities induce empathy in students?

Data: I used multiple data sets to answer this question. I focused on the following two questions in the post-test data, which is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections: (a) What were engaging or compelling points in this simulation for you? What made them compelling? (Section 1, Question 5); and (b) Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM (mountaintop mining) issue? If so, explain in detail. If not, why not? (Section 2, Question 6) In addition to post-test responses, I drew from my own observations in the classroom and from the audio and video recordings, reflection papers and exam responses, and interviews with students.

4. What are the pedagogical methods that transform a role-play from a cognitive classroom exercise to one in which students experience both cognitive and emotional engagement in the process of developing empathy for the parties represented in the role-play?

Data: I used many of the same data sets to answer this question as I did to answer Question 3. However, I relied in great part on student interviews to answer this question because it was in those conversations that I was able to ask the kinds of follow-up questions that provided greater insights into the particular pedagogical methods that worked well for students who were identified as experiencing increased empathy for the parties in conflict.

### **Data Collection**

To investigate how role-play activities enhanced students' empathy for parties in conflict, I collected the following data: (a) A journaling exercise completed by students prior to participating in the role-play *Can We Drink the Water?*; (b) An existing data set

of pre-tests and post-tests developed by the UELP's internal evaluator; (c) My observations of the role-plays as an instructor and as an observer in the classrooms of other instructors; (d) Video and audio recordings of role-plays, including simulated meetings and debriefings; (e) Reflection papers and exam responses in which students responded to questions about the role-play activity; and (f) Interviews with students who demonstrated empathy during role-play activities, based on observations.

I collected data from 198 students who participated in role-play activities between Spring 2011 and Fall 2013. I collected multiple forms of data from some students, such as pre-tests, post-tests and reflection papers. Table 1 includes each set of data collected (with the exception of researcher observations), organized by course, semester and professor. For quantifiable data sets, such as pre-tests and post-tests, the number collected is recorded in the box. Audio and video recordings are marked with an 'X' in the box if collected for the course. In this section I describe each of these sets of data and explain the justification for the collection, including what I expected to learn from each set.

**Table 1 Collected Data**

Course/ Semester/ Professor	Pre-test	Post-test	Audio recording	Video recording	Exam question	Reflection paper	Journaling activity	Student interviews
330 Spring 2011 GC				X				
330 Spring 2011 MS				X				
331 Spring 2011 GC			X	X		8		1
330 Fall 2011 AR			X		15			
330 Fall 2011 GC	25	20	X		24			
331 Fall 2011 GC	7	6	X	X		5		
330 Spring 2012 AR	17		X	X				
330 Spring 2012 GC	20	18	X	X	25			
331 Spring 2012 GC	4	4	X	X		4		
330 Fall 2012 AR	22	17	X		23			
330 Fall 2012 DS	24	20	X			27	11	
330 Spring 2013 AR	9	10			9		7	3
330 Spring 2013 DS	28	23	X			27	12	4
Grinnell Spring 2013 GC	7	6	X	X				
330 Fall 2013 AR							3	
330 Fall 2013 DS								

**Journaling exercise.** Students participating in the role-play *Can We Drink the Water?* completed an assignment prior to the first day of the simulated meetings in which they wrote about a day in the life of their role-play character. The journaling assignment

was distributed to students along with the description of the conflict and their role and is designed to guide students through an imaginative process in which they consider what a typical day is like in the life of their character. Students were instructed to write a narrative of the day, including details about their day from the time they wake up in the morning until they go to bed at night.

Below are the questions that prompt students in this assignment (See Appendix C for the full assignment):

1. 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?
2. As your day begins, what are the first few things you do? Do you get some coffee? Do you need to take care of 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?
3. From here I would like you 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.

4. 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 sleep?

Although the journaling exercise is completed prior to students participating in the simulation portion of the role-play activity, it is an important piece of preparing students for the simulation. Unlike other pre-simulation activities, such as listening to Susan Hirsch's lecture on conflicts associated with mountaintop coal mining and viewing the documentary *Deep Down*, this assignment requires students to engage for the first time with the character they will represent in the role-play. These written assignments are useful data in that they offer a sense of the extent to which students begin to empathize with the character they have been assigned.

**Pre-tests and post-tests.** Prior to the commencement of my study, pre-tests and post-tests had already been developed by the UELP's internal evaluator for the role-play activities I studied. The tests were designed to measure multiple factors, including student engagement, content knowledge and application of theory to practice. I coordinated with the project's internal and external evaluators to develop additional questions that would measure changes in levels of empathy. Initially, we developed questions that measure dispositional empathy, but as I further clarified my research questions and collaborated with my dissertation committee, I created a new set of questions designed to better measure changes in empathy in the context of the role-play activities.

The initial instrument asked students to select a response on a Likert scale, with options ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree," to statements such as, "I

can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation.” There were 14 such statements designed to measure dispositional empathy. The revised version of the instrument has two sections. In the first section, students are asked to use two or three words to describe the key positions of the parties involved in the conflict simulation. In the second section, students select from among nine options and circle all that they think describe how each group represented in the conflict simulation feels about the community conflict. Options include ‘angry,’ ‘hopeful,’ and ‘happy.’ Each section asks students to consider positions and feelings for each of the six parties represented in the conflict simulation. My analysis is focused on the revised instrument.

The pre-tests and post-tests have somewhat limited utility for my research, as they primarily detect the presence or absence of empathy, rather than identifying processes by which empathy is cultivated. Because my research questions are focused on discovering how, rather than if, role-play activities induce empathy in students, narrative forms of data proved to be more valuable. However, some open-ended questions in the pre-tests and post-tests were worth analyzing because many responses included valuable information about students' experiences with empathy. The open-ended questions in the post-test are particularly useful. In addition, the questions that were designed to detect empathy provided insight into changes in dispositional empathy and situational empathy among all students who participated in the activities.

**Instructor observations.** Of the 16 courses from which I collected data, I served as the instructor for seven of the courses. Although I frequently had assistance from another instructor or an intern during the role-play activity, I was responsible for ensuring

the activity went as planned. Thus, my ability to observe the simulated community meetings and small group debriefing sessions was somewhat limited. However, I still endeavored to observe the meetings, and I took notes while observing. As an instructor, I led the debriefing sessions with students following each simulated meeting, so I was unable to take notes during those sessions and had to rely on recordings to capture the contents of the discussions.

In courses in which I was not an instructor, I frequently assisted the instructor with the role-play or acted as an observer in the classroom. In these courses, I had more opportunities to observe simulated meetings and to take notes during meetings and debriefing sessions. Since the simulated meetings occurred simultaneously, I observed each group for approximately 5-10 minutes during each simulated meeting. In most classes there were five or six groups engaging in simulated meetings. The main exception to this is the CONF 331 course, which was a one-credit simulation course with fewer than 10 students each time it was offered.

**Audio and video recordings.** During the role-play activities students moved between simulated community meetings conducted in small groups, debriefing sessions in small groups, and debriefing sessions with the entire class. All small group meetings, simulations and debriefings alike, were audio recorded. Similarly, many large group (full class) debriefings were also audio recorded. Because I had access to multiple audio recorders but only one video recorder, only one small group was video recorded in each session. Some large group debriefings were also video recorded.



I recorded the sessions because I wanted to later review them to investigate uses of spoken and body language in demonstrating empathy or lack thereof. I also wanted to have a record of what happened during the role-play activities in case I had questions later about specific occurrences after reviewing my notes or interviewing a student.

**Reflection papers and exam questions.** The prompts for the papers and exam questions varied by instructor and, to some degree, by semester. However, although each instructor created his or her own exam question or reflection paper prompts, they were all generally designed to encourage students to think about what had happened in the activity and why, and to link concepts and theories studied in the course to the dynamics observed in the activity. One instructor, who also teaches courses in GMU's New Century College, used a guide developed by the college titled *The Rough Guide to Reflection* (See Appendix D).

The following questions are reflection paper prompts I assigned as an instructor using *The Last Resort*. Students were instructed to use these questions as a guide while writing reflection papers but were not required to answer all questions.

1. What did you learn from the simulation? What do you think were the missed opportunities for learning?
2. Were there parts of the conflict that you struggled to understand? If so, identify them, and consider what might have helped you to better understand them.

3. What was challenging about playing your role? What was most gratifying? At any point in the simulation, did you wish you were playing a different role (if so, which one and why that one)?
4. How do you feel about the suggestions and plans that emerged from the group? Do you think the group should have moved in a different direction? If so, why do you think that didn't occur, and what could the group have done differently?
5. Which theories of conflict facilitated your understanding of the conflict and/or the dynamics you observed in the group? Please identify the theories and the phenomena they helped you to understand.

The following paragraph is an example of an exam question assigned to students following participation in the role-play *Can We Drink the Water?*:

The culmination of this class is the simulation of community conflict in which we have engaged the last three sessions of the semester. In the spirit of your earlier reflection papers, reflect on the simulation and consider how the theories, concepts, models and frameworks we studied in this class contributed (or failed to contribute) to your understanding of the dynamics within the simulation. Be clear in your paper about which theories and/or frameworks were useful in your endeavor to understand the conflict and to participate in the simulation, and which were not (as appropriate). Although you may focus on any piece (or pieces) of the simulation in your response, you may wish to consider the dynamics within your small group, the role of leadership (both formal and informal), or the role of conflict narratives, to name a few possibilities.

Most reflection papers and exam responses were 5-10 pages in length. Although students were guided by prompts that encouraged particular types of reflection and the connection of theory to practice, these papers presented students with an opportunity to write about what struck them as compelling during the role-play activity. By the time they wrote the papers or exam responses, they had had time to think about and process the experience. Although it did not comprise a significant portion of most papers, many students wrote of their experience with attempting to connect with the character they portrayed in the activity. Therefore, these papers provided a lens for examining the process of making those connections.

**Student interviews.** I conducted interviews with students who, while engaging in role-play and/or in debriefing sessions, appeared to me to exhibit empathy with parties involved in the simulated conflicts. The following criteria were used to identify students who were considered good candidates for interviews:

- A student performing her assigned character in a manner consistent with the written description of the character. For example, a student representing the principal in *Can We Drink the Water?* would exhibit concern for the well being of the children in her school but would be reluctant to blame mining companies because her spouse is employed by the mining industry.
- A student describing moments of connection with her character during a debriefing session. For example, students sometimes share in a debriefing the experience of a shift from struggling to feel a connection with their

character to identifying more closely with the character when feeling attacked by others in a meeting.

- A student writing about experiences with connecting with a character, perspective taking, and/or empathy in reflection papers or exam responses. For example, the student quoted at the beginning of this dissertation wrote in a reflection paper that the activity changed his thinking about the conflict, and while he was still opposed to mountaintop mining, he felt empathy with those who work as miners, and he now believed that simply ending the practice without considering what will happen to miners is untenable.

Students were identified as interview candidates by me or by another instructor after observing the role-play activities and reviewing reflection papers and exam responses. I did not include pre-test and post-test results in the screening for interview candidates.<sup>2</sup> I contacted 15 students with interview requests, and I conducted interviews with eight students. Most interviews were conducted in an office on the GMU Fairfax campus. One interview was conducted on the telephone and one took place in a restaurant. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the students being interviewed.

I informed students of the nature of my research, and I explained to them that they were selected for an interview because they appeared to demonstrate empathy for one or more of the conflicting parties during the role-play activity. Interviews followed a semi-

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<sup>2</sup> Pre-tests and post-tests are confidential, so to contact students based on results from these tests would require a breach in confidentiality by associating a test with a student.

structured format. I developed five questions and asked various follow-up or clarifying questions, depending on the nature of the interview. All students were asked the following questions:

1. Were there times when you felt especially connected to the role you were playing? If so, what was that experience like for you? How did it feel? What do you think prompted your connection with that role?
2. Were there times when you felt connected to another role in the activity? If so, what was that experience like? What do you think prompted your connection with that role?
3. Were there elements of the role-play activity that made it easier or more difficult to connect with your role? If so, what were those? How did they affect your ability to play your role?
4. Did you gain new perspectives that you attribute to participating in this activity? If so, what are they? How do they differ from previous perspectives? What do you think it is about the activity that encouraged a perspective shift?
5. In what ways did you feel like yourself when you were in role, and in what ways did you feel like you were the character you were playing? Were there times when it was difficult to separate yourself from your role? If so, what was that experience like?

At the end of each interview, I asked students if there is anything they would like to add, and most did share some final thoughts. Most interviews took approximately 35 minutes to complete. The interviews yielded a wealth of information regarding the ways

in which students connected with the character they portrayed in the role-play activity. The semi-structured format afforded me the opportunity to delve further into questions that seemed fruitful based on initial responses. In most interviews I found that multiple follow-up questions helped both the student and me get a clearer sense of what was happening in a given situation. I discovered during the first interview that some of the earlier questions in the interview schedule were similar to later ones, but I also learned with later interviews that asking a slightly different question frequently elicited a different and unexpected reply. The interviews provided an opportunity to challenge the hunches I developed through my observations of the role-play activities and reviews of the pre-tests, post-tests and written assignments and to explore those hunches in depth.

### **Data Analysis**

In this section I will revisit each of the data sets I collected, and I will describe how each set was analyzed. As a reminder, I collected the following data from 198 undergraduate students: (a) A journaling exercise completed by students prior to participating in the role-play; (b) An existing data set of pre-tests and post-tests developed by the UELP's internal evaluator; (c) My observations as an instructor and as an observer in the classrooms of other instructors; (d) Video and audio recordings of role-plays, including simulated meetings and debriefings; (e) Reflection papers and exam responses in which students responded to questions about the activity; and (f) Interviews with students who demonstrated empathy during the role-play activity, based on observations.

**Journaling exercise.** In this exercise, students are asked to imagine a day in the life of the character they have been assigned for the role-play activity, and it includes questions to guide the students' writing. As one might expect, some students wrote the bare minimum, answering most of the questions without elaboration or evidence of thoughtfulness, while others wrote several pages and conveyed the sense that they had really developed a narrative for the character based on what they had learned through the description they had been given, research they had conducted, and what they imagined the person's life to be like. As I reviewed these assignments, I looked for evidence that the student has begun to try to identify with the character they have been assigned. In Chapter Five I discuss the importance of narrative in cultivating empathy through role-play, but for now I will share that this assignment offered a sense of a student's starting point with regard to demonstrating an understanding of the life of the character. A student who wrote a narrative that demonstrated complexity and made sense given the description of the character showed early signs of empathy with the character.

**Pre-tests and post-tests.** I approached the existing pre-test and post-test data on two fronts. First, I compared identical questions related to empathy for each student from the pre-test to post-test to detect any significant changes. The empathy questions changed over time from questions designed to detect general empathy to questions designed to measure empathy with the parties in conflict represented in the role-play activities. The original questions were developed by the UELP evaluators when my project was in its infancy and my research questions had not yet been finalized. I developed the second set of questions that replaced the original set in collaboration with my dissertation committee

as part of my research proposal. Although working with two disparate sets of questions makes it impossible to compare across all semesters, it is still possible to compare pre-test and post-test results for each semester separately.

Furthermore, after reviewing all the post-tests I identified two questions that tend to regularly include responses that pertain to the cultivation of empathy in students for characters in the role-play. Responses to these questions are important because they offer insights into students' perspectives on the structures and dynamics of the role-plays that helped to cultivate empathy. I did not compare the pre-test and post-test results on these questions because of differences between the two tests, that make such a comparison impossible. Rather than compare to the pre-test, the post-test questions are designed to capture the experiences of the student following the completion of the activity.

**Instructor observations.** My observations of students participating in simulated meetings and engaging in debriefing sessions with classmates provided early insights into connections between role-play and empathy as I developed hunches, later confirmed or called into question those hunches, and informed my decisions about what kinds of data to collect. While I did not develop a formal process for analyzing observations, I did review notes taken during observation periods at various stages of the research project, including when I was formulating questions for interviews with students.

**Video and audio recordings.** I reviewed all video and audio recordings to detect signs of empathy in students while they were participating in simulated community meetings. I also looked for expressions of empathy during debriefing sessions held between simulated meetings. Initially, I selected and viewed two video recordings from



different classes and different role-plays, and I noted what appeared to be indicators of empathy. In this initial review, I identified the following preliminary indicators: (a) Increased passion or intensity, frequently expressed through a raised voice, faster or slower speech, or greater enunciation; (b) Serious engagement, in which it appeared that the student was staying with the gravity of the meeting, often expressed as frustration; and (c) Demonstration of interest and earnestness, in which a student expressed a sense of urgency to deal with the problems at hand. I also noted the presence of shifts, when students moved into a space in which they seemed to embody their character to a greater extent. Sometimes the shifts also worked in reverse. The space occupied by participants while participating in a role-play activity is liminal, and positions are prone to changing in reaction to the group's dynamics.

After I completed the initial review of the videos, I developed narrative descriptions of the following observable role-play phenomenon: (a) Embodiment; (b) Shifts; and (c) Authenticity. In addition, I identified themes and segments of the role-play activity that had a significant impact on the dynamics of the simulated meeting.

What did it look like when a student embodied a role? How did it differ, if at all, from portraying a role? Embodiment in role-play is subtle and sometimes difficult to pinpoint. In part, detecting it required intimate knowledge of the role-play and subjectivity about the degree to which a student adopted the character he or she has been assigned. As I observed students engaged in role-play, I found embodiment to be a dynamic phenomenon. Distinctions between portrayal and embodiment were often difficult to discern. A key difference was that when a student portrayed his or her role,

the vibe tended to be more perfunctory. The student followed the guidelines created through the descriptions of the conflict and the character, but did not necessarily connect with the role in a meaningful way. By contrast, when a student embodied a role, the vibe tended to be more passionate. When observing a student embodying a role, one might conclude that something crucial is at stake. For example, a student portraying coal miner Harlie Mayford shared with fellow meeting participants that she was truly frightened that the mine where she works will close, and she will be without a job and without marketable skills, unable to support herself and her daughter. Not only did she share this fear, she did so in a way that conveyed genuine emotion.

Authenticity and embodiment are correlated phenomena in that authenticity is one way in which embodiment is detectable. When a student played a role authentically, what was often most noticeable at first is what was missing. Role-playing tends to be awkward at first for most students, so it was common to hear giggles as students tried to establish themselves in their roles and navigate group dynamics. An absence of laughter, often combined with the presence of appropriate emotions, such as frustration, concern or anger, signaled authenticity in a role-play. As with embodiment, an observer trying to identify authenticity will benefit from a deep understanding of the role-play and the conflict it represents.

Shifts in role-plays were identifiable either by a participant increasing or decreasing connection with the character he or she was representing or by new interactions between participants. An example of this is a student portraying the school principal and participating in the discussion in a reserved manner, assuring the meeting

participants of his or her intent to resolve the problem of water contamination, but remaining a bit distant. A shift occurred when another participant asked the principal if he or she was really the best advocate for the students, given that the principal's spouse was employed by a coal mine (this information is included in the role-play *Can We Drink the Water?*). Suddenly the student portraying the principal shifted from somewhat detached to engaged participation. The question posed by the other participant constituted a challenge to the principal's legitimacy and provided an opportunity to connect with the character more deeply. A shift such as this, which has the potential to create new divisions, may increase the overall tension in the meeting and result in the increased engagement of other participants as they alternately defend their positions and question the positions of others.

Other similar themes emerged in nearly all of the activity's simulated community meetings. This is by design; the information students receive about the conflict and their role in it, in addition to new information introduced during the role-play, pointed to particular themes. The following primary themes were easily identifiable through observations of the simulated meetings: (a) Closing the coal mine. This idea was typically presented early in the meeting by Shane Silver (anti-mining activist) or Terry McAfree (community member) and served to divide meeting participants. A discussion about closing the mine was apt to concern the miner, Harlie Mayford, and in many cases provided the student portraying Harlie with an opportunity to connect with the character more deeply in the face of perceived threat; (b) Testing the water to determine the source of the contamination. It was common for students to advocate for conducting tests of

water by an objective expert, thinking this would clarify what further steps need to be taken. This was an area in which many students found it challenging to portray their character authentically; in the conflict upon which the role-play is based, parties have not been able to agree that any organization that might test the water is objective. It was difficult for students, however, to be viewed as obstructionist because they refused to accept the results of water testing by a particular organization; (c) Identifying insiders and outsiders. The role-play includes two clear outsiders: Shane Silver, the college student activist, and Pastor Settle, the minister who was working with Habitat for Humanity. Although (s)he was an outsider, Pastor Settle was accepted by many as someone who had a genuine desire to help the community, so there was a tendency by students portraying community members to treat him or her with greater inclusivity than Shane Silver. This dynamic did not hold in every case, however, and sometimes Pastor Settle was regarded as a meddling outsider. This was particularly true when (s)he assumed a key role in a simulated meeting without realizing that position was rejected by other participants. Finally, insider/outsider dynamics sometimes developed in relation to whether or not a character's children attended the school with contaminated water. When this emerged as a theme, the parties who had children in the school questioned the intentions of meeting participants who did not have children in the school. Unsurprisingly, the easiest target for this type of questioning was college activist Shane Silver. However, when the dividing line was drawn based on having a clear interest in the welfare of the school's children (the principal of the school was sometimes included in this group, but that was not a given, and the principal's positioning was prone to shifting

during the simulated meetings), even community members like Terry McAfree became outsiders of sorts.

It was a challenge to identify empathy through observation in the participant with the character she or he was portraying in the role-play, in addition to empathy for other characters. It was easier to identify empathy expressed with others, particularly when it was shared explicitly and verbally (*e.g.*, “I understand how awful that must feel.”). In studies empathy is typically measured through changes in empathy scales from pre-intervention to post-intervention and through self-reports following an activity designed to cultivate empathy. Still, activities as extensive as the role-plays on which my research is centered, which also include in-depth debriefing sessions, lend themselves to observational study. When viewing videos, in particular, one can clearly see students grappling with the complexity of the conflict, striving to embody the party they have been assigned to portray, and experiencing moments when they have moved into the role so fully that they are portraying the party authentically.

**Reflection papers and exam responses.** These essays offered insights from students after they had some distance from the role-play and an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. The questions posed to students varied by instructor, but they tended to encourage students to share what happened during the role-play activity, to explore some of the conflict dynamics and proposed solutions, and to apply theories, frames and models studied in the course to the unfolding conflict and attempts to resolve it. Some instructors assigned this written reflection as a stand-alone paper, while others included a question on a mid-term or final exam that prompts the same sort of reflection process.

To analyze the written responses, I identified words and phrases that indicated the presence of empathy. Next, because the purpose of my research is to understand how empathy is cultivated for parties in conflict, I reviewed the text near the indicator word or phrase to try to discover the factors that led to the cultivation of empathy. Some students referred to empathy explicitly, while others wrote of “understanding,” “feeling what it must be like,” or similar vocabulary that marks the presence of empathy. I rejected the notion of creating a restrictive list of words and phrases for the purpose of detecting empathy after reviewing several essays and recognizing that although there were some words and phrases that appeared consistently, it would be easy to miss markers of empathy by students who use different language to convey similar experiences.

**Student interviews.** As noted earlier, I conducted interviews with students who demonstrated empathy during a role-play activity’s simulated meetings or debriefing sessions (see Appendix E for indicators of empathy and examples of when it was and was not detected). All interviews were audio recorded, and I took minimal notes to jog my memory later. I did not transcribe interviews, but rather listened to each interview one or more times and took notes while listening. As I listened to recordings of the interviews, I took note of the ways in which students described the experience of developing connections to the character they portrayed in the role-play activity, as well as connecting with other characters in the simulated meetings. Recalling that these students were selected for interviews because they had been identified as expressing empathy during the role-play, I was especially interested in discovering students’ perspectives on how components of the activity encouraged or hampered their ability to cultivate empathy

with their own character and with other characters. After reviewing all interviews sufficiently, I identified and recorded themes that emerged through the process, such as the importance of the journaling exercise in helping them to imagine life as their character and the ways in which they drew from their own life experiences to inform their role-play performances.

## **Conclusion**

I studied two role-play activities, *Can We Drink the Water?* and *The Last Resort*, in undergraduate CAR classrooms to examine the ways in which empathy is cultivated through role-play. The role-plays were designed by SCAR's UELP and simulated conflict related to the practice of MTM in Appalachian communities in the United States. In both role-plays, students participated in simulated community meetings as characters that represented the parties in conflict. The role-plays included preparatory activities, such as a journaling exercise and the screening of the documentary *Deep Down*; the simulated meetings; debriefing sessions after each of the simulated meetings; and reflection papers or exam responses following the role-plays. In addition, students completed pre-tests and post-tests that were developed by the UELP's internal and external evaluators.

I collected data from the following sources for my study: pre-tests, post-tests, notes from observations of live role-plays, notes from observations of audio and video recordings, students' reflection papers, students' responses to exam questions, and notes from interviews with students. I identified two questions in post-tests that offered insight into my research questions, and I reviewed responses to those questions from students in all courses in which the role-plays were included. In analyzing other data, I conducted

reviews in which I searched for and identified themes by key words and phrases, including ‘empathy,’ ‘perspective taking,’ and phrases such as ‘connected with my character.’ Finally, I used the literature on empathy and role-play to contextualize my findings.



## Chapter Four: Role-Play and the Cultivation of Empathy

*“His grandfather was actually a miner, so he was on the ground, had been working on the ground. That created, I imagine, this kind of tie between the character, my character, the principal, and the miners. But at the same time I realized that my character wanted to protect the children as well, so he would not necessarily side with the miners, but his family history makes him almost have to side with them. That’s when I started to develop an empathy for him.”*

In Chapter Three I provided detailed descriptions of the two role-play activities I studied. In this chapter I examine classroom role-plays as sites where empathy may be cultivated, and I offer a cursory look at my research findings, which will be described in greater detail in the following chapters. I begin the chapter by briefly examining the use of role-play activities in the CAR field, especially with regard to increasing perspective taking and cultivating empathy. Next I turn to two topics that factor importantly in my findings: preparation for role-play, especially through narrative activities, and role-play as a performance. I conclude this chapter with best practices I have identified for role-play activities in CAR classrooms, both through what I have learned as I have used role-plays as an instructor and through the research I conducted for this study. I consider these practices I identify to be best for role-plays that include increased perspective taking and

empathy cultivation as explicit objectives; they may be less relevant for role-plays that focus mostly on skill development.

### **Role-Play in Conflict Resolution**

Role-play activities are used in CAR classrooms for multiple purposes. In part, role-plays offer students a relatively safe way of approximating an experience of a conflict, and because they occur in a controlled classroom space, they provide opportunities for students to analyze the conflict and reflect on their experiences through debriefing sessions. Role-plays are also used as skill-building activities; for example, students may serve as facilitators for role-plays that simulate conflict resolution processes such as mediation or dialogue. To accomplish skill-building objectives, an instructor may design the role-play as a fish bowl activity. In a fish bowl design, some participants occupy an inner circle, which is where active participation in the role-play occurs, while others remain in an outer circle, where they can observe the dynamics of the inner circle and “tap in” to the inner circle when they desire. This design allows participants to move in and out of roles, and in particular it offers all students an opportunity to serve in the role of the facilitator.

The role-play activities I studied did not include an assigned facilitator or mediator role, but they did include characters that were potentially positioned to take on such a role. Although there was potential for students to practice conflict resolution skills through participation in the role-plays, the primary objectives focused on students experiencing and learning about the conflict, as well as gaining a better understanding of group dynamics in a conflict. I studied two of the three role-plays that were developed by

the UELP for use in undergraduate CAR classrooms. The role-play authors and other UELP members established learning outcomes for the activities that aligned with the learning objectives of the CAR courses in which the role-plays were included. The two role-plays I studied included the following learning outcomes:

- 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, they 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 community meetings.

The outcomes apply to the role-play activities as a whole, and not only the simulated meetings. They are achieved through participation in the preparatory activities, the simulated meetings, the debriefing sessions, and through writing reflection papers and

essay responses. The role-plays I studied were components of courses about conflict analysis and resolution in groups and communities, which explains the emphasis on understanding group and community dynamics, and illustrates the alignment of a role-play with course objectives.

Despite their frequent use in CAR classrooms, role-play pedagogy has its detractors in the CAR field. There are two main concerns with the use of role-play activities. First, some argue that the evidence does not support the claim that students learn course material through participation in role-plays, and second, some express concerns that role-plays may do more harm than good because students are not equipped to portray characters in a role-play authentically and instead reinforce negative stereotypes through their portrayals (Alexander & LeBaron, 2009; Druckman & Ebner, 2008). The concerns and criticisms are valid; role-play is a pedagogical tool, and it is not useful or ideal in all classroom settings or to meet all learning objectives. There is, however, a great deal of evidence that supports the claim that role-play generally is an effective way of cultivating empathy and increasing perspective-taking (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Henn, n.d.; Poorman, 2002; “Walk A Mile in Digital Shoes: The Impact of Embodied Perspective-Taking on The Reduction of Negative Stereotyping in Immersive Virtual Environments,” n.d.). Increasingly, researchers are investigating the uses of video games and other digital technology that facilitate participation in a simulated environment as ways of cultivating situational empathy, but several studies have also found in-person role-plays to be effective in this area.

### **Preparation for Role-Play with Narrative Activities**

The classroom role-plays I studied included multiple narrative activities that were designed primarily to prepare students to authentically portray their characters in simulated community meetings. Through the various activities, students had opportunities to learn about the history and dynamics of MTM-related conflicts in Appalachia, and they were able to apply their new knowledge to the development of their own characters. The narrative activities included a journaling exercise, a lecture about the conflict delivered by Susan Hirsch, the documentary film *Deep Down*, about a community experiencing MTM-related conflicts, a book chapter and articles about the conflict, video clips representing the conflict from a variety of perspectives, and a caucus meeting with other students who are portraying the same character in the simulated meetings.

Narrative activities, such as reading literature or writing short biographies, help to form connections with others that may cultivate empathy. Of the narrative activities in which students engaged as part of the role-plays, I focused my attention on the journaling exercise and the documentary. In Chapter Five I justify those selections, and I present a review of the relevant narrative literature and my findings that support a link between narrative activities and the cultivation of empathy.

### **Performing Characters in Role-Play**

Although the emphasis in classroom-based role-plays is not on the quality of acting, role-play requires performance, and students are encouraged to portray their character as authentically as possible. Students frequently report that this is one of the

most challenging aspects of role-play; many feel self-conscious and ill equipped to represent a person about whom they know relatively little. With the exception of the students who enjoy performing, role-play activities move students out of the comfort zone of typical classroom activities, such as lectures and discussions (Shaw, 2004, p. 5). While some students welcome this challenge, or at least the diversion from the norm, others resist it or are intimidated by it.

Recalling the conceptualization of empathy drawn from Throop's work, as moments of connection, such moments act as mini-performances. In *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Foster also describes empathy in terms of 'moments of connection,' and conceptualizes it as performance. She writes that it is "as if it were a performance, staging the moment of connection by describing the positions, movements, and feelings of all those involved" (2010, p. 13). Perhaps role-play activities, which require participants to perform the characters they portray, support the cultivation of empathy in part because empathy is itself a performance.

In Chapter Six I present my findings on the importance of performance in cultivating empathy through role-play, and there I provide a review of the performance literature as it relates to role-play, as well as support from my data for the claim that the performance elements of role-play activities foster empathy.

### **Pedagogy and Best Practices of Role-Play**

As established earlier, role-play activities are a staple of many conflict resolution classrooms, particularly at the undergraduate level, where students tend to appreciate frequent opportunities to engage in experiential learning. Unlike some other experiential

activities, though, students and instructors often have strong feelings about role-play activities, frequently based on past experiences; they either love it or they hate it.

Through my experiences as an instructor using role-plays in the classroom and through a review of the role-play literature, I have identified the following practices that make it more likely that CAR students will have a positive experience with role-play and that the conditions are created in which the cultivation of empathy is possible: (a) Engage students in a brainstorming discussion about their experiences with role-play prior to the commencement of the activity; (b) Choose real-life conflicts for role-plays; (c) Select a complex, multi-dimensional, but manageable, conflict upon which to base the role-play; (d) Include characters that are able to step into the role of a conciliator; (e) Create incentives for participation in the role-play; (f) Ensure that the author of the role-play has a solid working knowledge of the conflict and the various stakeholders involved; (g) Prepare students well for their roles by teaching them about the conflict and providing opportunities both for them to become familiar with stakeholder narratives and to create narratives for their characters; (h) Create characters that are capable of constructive engagement in the simulated interactions. In the following sections I will describe each practice in greater detail; and (i) Create opportunities for instructors who are using the role-play to reflect together on the experience and what was learned, and potentially make changes to the role-play.

**Brainstorm role-play experiences.** To tease out some of what happens in role-play that makes it either a great learning experience or a waste of time, one approach that has worked well in my classrooms is a discussion and brainstorming session about role-

play prior to the commencement of the simulation. This session provides students and instructors an opportunity to reflect on previous experiences with role-play and to identify what works well and what makes it challenging or frustrating. Frequently, as the discussion progresses, it evolves from the identification of specific actions within role-play, such as staying in character, to broader themes of representation and participation. When students later engage in the role-play, they can recall this discussion and potentially be more reflective of the role-play's dynamics in the moment. Furthermore, it may prove useful for an instructor to return briefly to the themes from the discussion during the first role-play debriefing.

**Choose real-life conflicts for role-plays.** In the role-plays I studied, the conflicts were real, but some elements of the activities, such as the names of the towns, were fabricated. This offered balance, in that students could easily research the conflict, and would even hear about it at times from news sources, but they did not get caught up in the particular details of real-life towns. Attributes of real-life towns informed the descriptions of the towns in the role-plays, but the towns were a hybrid and not representative of any single community.

**Select intractable conflicts for role-plays.** If one role-play learning objective is for students to develop perspective-taking skills or to cultivate empathy for the parties involved in the conflict, writing or selecting role-plays based on intractable conflicts with complex characters will challenge students and do more to develop those skills. Such conflicts stretch students beyond comfortable boundaries when they are required to embody the parties and perform them authentically in an interactive context. As a



cautionary note, this approach could backfire if the conflict seems overwhelming. The students are still likely to participate in the role-play (especially if it is part of their grade for the course), but they may struggle with character portrayal or revert to stereotypes.

Intractable conflicts require more class time if students are to be given adequate time to grapple with the complex issues, but most students informally report an appreciation for role-plays that do not feel rushed, as long as they do not drag on past the point of usefulness. As long as they are given sufficient time to complete the role-play, many students I have taught express a preference for role-plays based on complex, interesting conflicts, rather than on what they may perceive as low-stake conflicts, such as interpersonal conflicts involving roommates or families.

**Include characters that may take on the role of conciliator.** As a reminder, no characters in the role-plays I studied were assigned such a role, so it was left to students to decide, in the context of the group dynamics, if they wanted to try to assume that role. The character of the pastor was written in such a way that it made it most likely that he or she would take on the role of conciliator if anyone were to do so, but the principal was another character well positioned to take on that role. The principal had ties to both the students and the mining community (through their spouse). The PTA president called the meeting, and in that role was sometimes viewed by others as “in charge,” but was not seen as impartial.

**Create incentives for participation in the role-play.** In a classroom, the most simple and obvious incentive is a grade. The instructors who used the role-plays I studied included participation in the role-play as part (and a significant part for some instructors)

of students' overall participation grade for the course. Although some students will be motivated by the opportunity to learn, others will not, and full participation in a role-play with many characters is important to the success of the activity. Ensuring that something important is at stake for students will increase the likelihood of full participation and a meaningful experience for students.

**Role-plays should be written by knowledgeable authors.** A variety of role-play activities are used in CAR classrooms, from those that simulate interpersonal disputes to mock United Nations meetings that simulate international negotiations. Some activities do not require the role-play's author to possess any particular knowledge beyond what most adults have acquired from living in the world. A role-play based on a fairly simple conflict involving co-workers or friends could be written by most instructors without much difficulty, although one must always consider the ways in which differences in culture may affect one's interpretation of a role-play scenario. A role-play centered on a complex environmental conflict with parties representing a wide variety of organizations and interests is likely to better mirror reality if it is written by an instructor who has experience with the conflict and has met or knows a good deal about the parties involved. In part, it is easier for an instructor who has such connections to develop complex characters with multiple identities and conflicting interests. By engaging with multi-dimensional characters, students encounter the complexity of the conflict, which makes them less reliant on stereotypes to portray characters or come to quick, but unrealistic, conclusions because the description of the conflict and character descriptions are not written in ways that support such results.

Furthermore, it gives the role-play legitimacy if it is accurate in its depiction of the conflict. Although most students who participated in the two role-plays in this study were unfamiliar with the mountaintop mining conflict prior to the role-play, there were a few students from the Appalachian region who were somewhat familiar with it, and other students who were intimately involved as activists. It is important that those participants who are familiar with the conflict can recognize it in the role-play description.

*Can We Drink the Water?* was developed by Susan Hirsch following multiple visits to the Appalachian region where conflicts associated with the practice of MTM are common. During these visits Dr. Hirsch met with many of the stakeholders, including religious leaders and environmental activists. Her knowledge of the various parties in the conflict, especially their cultures and identities, informed the multi-dimensional characters she developed for the role-play activity. For example, Denny Bruno, the school principal, was indeed concerned about the students' health and welfare, but he could not ignore that pressure on coal mining companies could cause harm to his wife, who was an employee of a mining company. The character of Pastor Settle, who in the role-play was a visitor to the community who was leading a Habitat for Humanity project, was based in part on a pastor Dr. Hirsch met in West Virginia who was involved with the mountaintop mining conflict. There were elements of Pastor Settle's character that were quite different from the real-life pastor upon which the character was based, and the same was true of other characters, such as the activist who lived in the community.

Although my experience in the region is not as extensive as that of Dr. Hirsch, I learned much about it through conversations with her and through my own research prior to writing *The Last Resort*. Fortunately, shortly after writing the role-play, I also spent time in the coalfields communities of West Virginia, and in addition to enhancing the role-play activity by sharing those experiences with my students, my visit prompted me to revisit the role-play scenario and descriptions of characters, and to make minor changes that reflected what I learned through my visit. As an example, my experience meeting with anti-MTM activists led me to review the description of the character of the activist in the role-play *The Last Resort*, who was a lifetime resident of a rural Appalachian community. I did so to ensure the clarity in the character description of the activist's commitments both to the ideals of the anti-MTM movement and to the Appalachian region.

**Prepare students adequately to participate authentically in role-play.** It is important that students have adequate time to prepare for a role-play and materials that provide the information they need to participate meaningfully. Any instructor who has used role-play activities in the classroom has likely heard students express the desire for more information. Students who participated in the two role-plays in this study received an extensive lecture on the history and dynamics of the conflict, watched a documentary about the conflict, read a book chapter and articles about it, watched video clips of various stakeholders, and completed a journaling exercise, but many students still expressed a desire for more information. To be clear, students did not necessarily want more information about the conflict itself, but rather more information about their

character so they would know how to create an accurate portrayal. My hunch is that this desire reflects the difficult task of authentically portraying another person, and the students' discomfort with that challenge.

As discussed earlier, narrative activities are an important component of role-play preparation. Some promote the idea that role-plays are most successful when participants write their own roles; that did not happen with the role-play activities in this study, but students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to develop their characters through the journaling exercise they completed prior to the first simulated community meeting (Naidu, Ip, & Linser, 2000; van Rooij, 2012).

**Create characters capable of constructive engagement.** The characters included in each role-play activity were carefully selected on the basis of a few factors. First, it was important to the legitimacy of the role-play that the characters were believable as people who would be involved in the kinds of meetings that comprised the role-play activities. Second, it was important to the quality of the role-play as a learning experience for students that the characters be capable of constructive engagement. If there were characters included who were realistically positioned solely as obstructionists, their presence would have had the potential to prevent any meaningful discussion, especially if the character represented a powerful stakeholder.

For example, both of the role-plays I studied included a representative from a mining company that engages in MTM in the respective communities, but the representatives were not mine executives; rather, one activity included a mine employee and the other a mine manager. Although these characters lacked the authority to make

decisions, and that led to some frustration in the simulated meetings, they were not restrained by the need to represent corporate interests. To some degree, they operated as the mid-level actors that Lederach describes as essential to peacebuilding processes because they are able to influence the grassroots and the top leadership (1997, p. 46).

**Create opportunities for instructors reflect and adapt.** During the time an instructor is using a role-play in a course, especially if it is over multiple semesters, there are likely to be changes that will require adaptation if the instructor wants to maintain the relevance of the role-play and improve it when possible. In addition to changes "on the ground" with the conflict, instructors are likely to receive new information from the following sources that may affect the role-play: feedback from students, their own observations and analysis, and new or newly discovered scholarly research. This was certainly the case with both role-plays I studied. The journaling exercise in *Can We Drink the Water?* was not initially included in the role-play activity, but was later added when a new instructor introduced it. It received favorable feedback from students and instructors, in addition to being consistent with findings in scholarly literature on the benefits of narrative character development by students in role-play activities (Nielsen, 2002; van Rooij, 2012). One of the new scenarios introduced in *The Last Resort* to mimic the dynamic nature of conflict was added when I discovered a grant offered by the West Virginia governor's office for communities like the one in the simulation. In the new scenario, one member of the community group discovers the grant, and the group decides whether to apply, and what sort of project they will propose if they do apply. Revisiting

role-play activities regularly and making changes based on new information or new scholarship keeps the activities relevant.

### **Embodiment in Role-Play and its Challenges**

Authentic participation in role-play requires a temporary suspension of self to portray a character. In role-plays used in CAR classrooms, the characters represent parties in conflict. Literature on Christianity and video game research offer a concept, self-forgetfulness, which is useful to consider here (Fang & Zhao, 2010; Merton, 1986; Ravaja et al., 2004). During a role-play, a participant attempts to 'forget' how she would act or respond as herself in order to act or respond as one's role-play character. There are multiple examples from student interviews and reflection papers of students making an effort to do this. One student explained, "I had to think what Harlie would do in this situation, and try not to think about what I would do." At times, students reported feeling confident that they had successfully represented the interests of their character in the role-play, and at other times they questioned their ability to do it well. These self-reports are supported by my own observations during role-play activities. Especially with students I knew fairly well, it was possible to discern when they were authentically portraying their character in the role-play by expressing views that were very different from their own. There were also times when the distinction between self and character was less clear. For example, I interviewed one student who played the role of the student activist. While not an activist, he does consider himself to be an environmentalist, and he found that his own values aligned closely with the perceived values of the role he was playing.

When students must travel a great distance to assume a role, it can be incredibly challenging for them. Although one might believe it is easier for a student to assume the role of a college student involved in a roommate conflict than it is to assume the role of a coal miner, that assumption might be inaccurate. Especially at a university with students from diverse backgrounds, such as GMU, it is foolish to make assumptions about students' experiences. It was challenging for most students to assume many of the roles in the role-plays I studied. In particular, some students struggled with the role of Harlie, a coal miner.

This begs the question: Why use role-play in the classroom if authentically portraying characters is so difficult for students? What benefits do students get from a role-play of this nature that they wouldn't get from a role-play that only requires them to play a slightly different version of themselves? When I discussed this with students in the classroom, I reminded them that conflict resolution practitioners frequently ask parties to travel such distances by seeking to understand others who are much different from them, and I asked them if they thought it was important to have some sense of that experience. That perspective tended to resonate with them, and it potentially increased the relevance of the activity because they could connect it to a skill that may be valuable to them in the future as an analyst or practitioner. As an instructor, it can be difficult to find a balance between pushing students beyond what feel comfortable and keeping them engaged and hopeful. In role-play activities, debriefing sessions can offer excellent opportunities to discuss some of these challenging issues.



In addition to helping students experience the discomfort of being stuck in an intractable conflict by creating complex characters, such complexity also posits competing moral questions with which the character is struggling. My interviews and students' reports in reflection papers suggested that recognition of such struggles provided a basis for connection and perhaps space for the cultivation of empathy. A student will likely struggle to understand the experience and internal struggle of someone who lives in a rural community dependent on coal, is loyal to friends and family members with ties to coal companies, but also suffers ailments related to contaminated drinking water at home and believes the coal mines are responsible. Without an identical experience as a basis for comparison, a student may empathize with this individual's plight by connecting with similar, if not entirely comparable, experiences, such as being torn between friends and family members with opposing political views. This is a simplified comparison, but even tapping into an experience like that can begin to facilitate a student's deeper connection with a party in the conflict via a character. A student may need to draw from multiple experiences in which he or she has struggled with something akin to the character's experiences in order to begin to empathize with the character.

## **Conclusion**

Role-play activities are a common feature of the curriculum in CAR classrooms for several reasons, including the opportunities they provide to learn about a conflict through experiential means and to practice third-party intervener skills. Role-plays can also strengthen perspective-taking skills and help to cultivate situational empathy in

students with the conflict parties represented in a role-play. This study focuses on role-play as a means of achieving the cultivation of empathy, and particularly with answering the question of how that process occurs. The results of my investigation highlight two elements of role-play as important in cultivating empathy: the use of narrative activities to prepare students for role-play, and the performance of a character in a role-play. In Chapter Five I present the results of my study with regard to the use of narrative preparatory activities, and in Chapter Six I do the same for the element of performance in role-play.

Despite the documented benefits of role-play, some scholars have legitimate concerns about the limits of role-play and potential damages that may be incurred. In particular, there are concerns about the authenticity (or lack thereof) of role-play activities, and about participants who engage in inauthentic performances or caricature, potentially reinforcing damaging stereotypes. This concern was also identified by students in classroom brainstorming sessions about role-play that were part of the students' preparation; in those sessions, many students noted that role-plays work best when participants are prepared to portray their characters and remain in character as much as possible.

In part as a way of addressing some of the concerns about role-play, I developed a set of best practices in this chapter for CAR instructors to consider when using role-play activities, especially when they the cultivation of empathy or perspective taking are learning objectives. It is also important when deciding whether or not to include role-play in a CAR classroom to consider if there are other experiential activities that may be better

suited to the desired outcomes. In addition to role-plays, members of the UELP designed a variety of experiential activities, including a focus group and an activity applying models of conflict analysis to a film. Role-play activities can contribute meaningfully to the curriculum in a CAR classroom, and if they are designed well they can be particularly useful as a method of cultivating empathy with parties in conflict, but they should not be used if another activity is more appropriate in a given context.

## Chapter Five: Empathy Through Narratives in Role-Play

The role-play activities I studied included multiple narrative activities, which served to prepare students for the simulated community meetings in which they would perform the character they had been assigned. The narrative activities included a lecture by Susan Hirsch, who shared the conflict's metanarratives and individual stories with students; a caucus meeting with students who had been assigned the same character as a way of developing a story for each character; a documentary, *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country*, which is about an Appalachian community coping with the effects of mountaintop mining; and a journaling exercise in which students write about a day in the life of their character.

Through this study I discovered that two of these narrative activities, the documentary film and the journaling exercise, contributed to students' increased empathy, according to reports by students through debriefing sessions, reflection papers, post-tests, and interviews. The two activities served different purposes in preparing students for the simulated meetings: The screening of *Deep Down* was intended to serve as a window into a community experiencing conflicts associated with mountaintop mining and offer an introduction to conflict parties, the conflict storylines, and the complexity of the conflict. The journaling exercise was included for the purposes of engaging students in the process of character development, which encourages emotional

investment in the character and initiates the cultivation of empathy by offering students an opportunity to create a complex, multi-dimensional character.

This finding fits with the literature on links between narratives and empathy. Although most studies focus on literary fiction as narrative-induced empathy, the overall findings of such studies point to the connections formed with well-developed characters, whether in a novel or another narrative form (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006). In a study on teaching empathy in professional education, researchers investigated students who constructed ‘personas’ in narrative form to develop empathy for the user of a product or service (van Rooij, 2012).

Some of the narrative elements were not originally included in the design of the role-plays but were added after deploying pilot versions the activities. Both formally and informally, instructors reflected on the initial iterations of the activities with students and with one another, and through these reflections found ways to change and improve the role-plays. For example, another instructor and I audio recorded a debriefing session on one of the role-plays after each of us had used it in a course for the first time. These reflection sessions helped instructors to better understand how and what students learned through the role-plays, and they helped to identify gaps in learning or areas of weakness. They also generated ideas for alterations to activities or new activities to include in subsequent versions of the role-plays. It was through these processes that narrative elements, such as a documentary film, video clips and articles, and the journaling exercise, were added to the role-plays.

In this chapter, the first of two chapters presenting my research findings, I offer evidence for the claim that narrative activities cultivate empathy, and I describe what kinds of narrative activities were included in the role-plays I studied, and how they were used. After placing the link between narratives and empathy in the context of narrative conflict analysis and resolution, I present detailed descriptions of the two narrative activities that students identified as being useful in their efforts to connect with role-play characters. I provide support for this claim from students' responses in interviews, comments in reflection papers, and responses to post-test questions. This chapter highlights the value of narrative activities to prepare students for meaningful participation in role-plays and demonstrates that such activities help students connect with their character and with the parties involved in the conflict in general.

### **Cultivating Empathy with Narratives**

Multiple studies have established links between narratives and empathy, with a focus on reading fiction to cultivate empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; D. Johnson, 2012; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2006). These studies, most of which have been conducted in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, conclude that individuals who read fiction tend to demonstrate superior social abilities, including the ability to empathize, when compared with individuals who read non-fiction or read neither.

Some factors that influence the cultivation of empathy through reading fictional narratives include the extent of the differences between the one who is attempting to empathize and the fictional character, the feeling with which one is trying to empathize, and the dispositional empathy, or empathic capacity, of the one who is trying to

empathize. In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” Keen offers some reasons why there are differences in the way readers respond to fictional characters, such as different empathic dispositions, the timing and context of the reading experience, and differences in responses (which may be related to education or familiarity with certain literary devices) to an author’s use of formulaic conventions (2006, p. 214). Some of these reasons for different responses are more applicable to the narratives in the role-play activities than others are, but the first two are likely relevant. Although students’ dispositional empathy was not the focus of my research, I noted in Chapter Two that pre-tests and post-tests for the role-play activities in Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 included measures of dispositional empathy, and overall I found no major differences among students within classes. With regard to timing and context, I found that when students discussed these elements, their ability to relate to characters was influenced by their own life circumstances and experiences.

One important difference between my study and the bulk of the studies on narratives and empathy building is that those studies focus on fictional narratives and the act of reading. By contrast, I studied a non-fiction narrative (the documentary *Deep Down*) and the creation of a fictional character’s narrative based on a brief character description. The journaling exercise as a narrative form resembles a method used with students of system and product design and human-computer interaction (HCI), referred to as narrative personas or narrative vignettes. In a study with students of design, a “field in which empathy is deemed integral to professional success” (van Rooij, 2012, p. 78), a GMU researcher investigated an activity in which graduate students constructed narrative

personas of expected users of products and services as a way of developing an empathic connection with the users and found that developing research-based personas helped students better understand and empathize with prospective users (van Rooij, 2012). Narrative vignettes, used in the HCI field, “are short pen pictures of people in a setting (that) have been used to capture the felt experience of working in a particular place or setting” (Wright & McCarthy, 2008, p. 642). A particular type of narrative vignette used in design is the character-driven scenario, in which the purpose of character development in a narrative includes not only information relevant to use of a system or product, but also “personal (inner) and inter-personal (social, public, professional) elements” of a character (Nielsen, 2002, p. 103). By creating multi-dimensional characters, such narratives are similar to those that emerge from the journaling exercise. Although the methods used to build empathy in the field of design serve different objectives than those associated with the journaling exercise, they are similar in that they both rest on the proposition that writing a narrative from the perspective of another person builds empathy with that person.

Documentary films as narrative tools offer multiple perspectives on an issue. As is the case with narrative personas or vignettes, documentaries are also used in the field of design as a way of cultivating empathy. Films generally provide viewers with opportunities to see the world through the eyes of others. Raijmakers, Gaver, and Bishay studied the use of various types of documentaries with designers and engineers, followed by discussions about the films, and they developed ‘design documentaries,’ which are “meant to inform and inspire design” (2006, p. 236). These documentaries portray people



in their everyday lives and, like the narrative vignettes and personas, their purpose is to help designers understand the lives of particular people and consider what their needs are. In another study, researchers investigated the effects of vignettes from documentary films on the ability of boys with disruptive behavioral disorders (DBD) to empathize (de Wied, Goudena, & Matthys, 2005). They found variation in the boys' responses to the vignettes, and they demonstrated that while the boys tested lower on empathy measures than their non-DBD counterparts, they responded with greater empathy to some vignettes, thereby exhibiting capacity for situational empathy (de Wied et al., 2005, p. 874).

Despite much of the recent focus in social science research and in popular media on correlations between empathy and literary fiction, additional research has indicated that other narrative forms, including films and narrative vignettes, also have the potential to cultivate empathy. Before turning to my findings, which reveal connections between the narrative elements of the role-play activities and the cultivation of empathy, I will briefly discuss the relationship between narratives and conflict resolution, especially as it relates to my research.

### **A Narrative Understanding of Conflict**

In the broadest terms, a narrative is an account of events. A more nuanced understanding of narrative is that it offers "accounts of what happened to particular people - and of what it was like for them to experience what happened" and "is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman, 2009, p. 2). In other words, it is through a narrative framework that we make sense of the world.

At the heart of a narrative approach to conflict analysis and resolution are the first two words of Cobb's book, *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative Dynamics in Conflict Resolution*: "Stories matter" (2013, p. 3). A narrative of conflict does more than simply tell the story of the conflict, though; it is a lens through which an analyst can discover the meaning parties make of events, "making the social and cultural world visible" (Cobb, 2013; Monk & Winslade, 2013, p. 17). Cobb argues that a narrative lens links multiple conflict resolution processes, which are "enacted in conversations in which stories are launched, elaborated, destabilized, and otherwise unfolded" (2013, p. 15). Because, in Cobb's view, narratives are key to processes such as dialogue, mediation, and peacemaking, and understanding such practices through a narrative lens advances conflict resolution practice. With regard to mediation, in particular, Winslade and Monk use narrative techniques such as deconstructive inquiry (asking questions that destabilize a story) and externalizing conversation (assigning a name to a problem story) to focus parties on the conflict story and to develop "a story of relationship that is incompatible with the continuing dominance of conflict" (2013, pp. 10, 60).

Although stories and narratives are terms that are frequently used interchangeably, Cobb distinguishes between the two. Narratives contain stories, but while a story is a recounting of a sequence of events, a narrative "refers to the way events are contextualized and presented as a coherent whole, to make a point" (2013, p. 27). Other scholars, however, treat stories and narratives as essentially the same (Monk & Winslade, 2013; Shuman, 2005). While it is beyond the scope of this project to contribute

to the scholarly discourse on differences between stories and narratives, it is important to be clear about the way the terms are understood and used in this dissertation. Although I use the terms interchangeably, as most scholars do, I do not claim that every story is a narrative, and I am clear in my writing about the differences between the two narrative activities that are central to my findings.

The first of the two narrative activities used in the role-plays is the documentary film *Deep Down*, which tells the story of a community in Kentucky torn apart by conflict related to the practice of mountaintop mining. The second activity is the journaling exercise students completed prior to participating in the role-play activity *Can We Drink the Water?*<sup>3</sup> Both the documentary and the journaling exercise contained multiple narratives within, and I offer examples of those narratives in later sections. I also provide descriptions of both the documentary film and the journaling exercise, and the findings that support my claim of the importance of narratives in the role-plays for cultivating empathy in students. Prior to that, in the following section, I describe all narrative facets of the role-play activities, which are used to prepare students for participation in the simulated meetings, and I justify my focus on two components, the documentary and the journaling exercise, which are explored in remainder of this chapter.

### **Narrative Preparation for Role-Play**

The mountaintop mining role-play activities included one or more class sessions (depending on the class's meeting schedule) that prepared students to participate authentically in the simulated community meetings. As a reminder, authentic

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<sup>3</sup> Students who participated in *The Last Resort* role-play activity did not complete a journaling activity.

participation is focused and engaged, and includes staying in character, engaging in the simulated meetings, and expressing emotions when appropriate (Hale & City, 2006, pp. 79–85). Authentic participation in a role-play served as an indicator of potential empathy.

In the preparation sessions, students learned about the conflicts associated with mountaintop mining by watching a recorded lecture by Susan Hirsch; caucusing with other students who had been assigned the same character to discuss the character's positions, interests, values, and needs in relation to the conflict; and watching *Deep Down*. In her lecture, Hirsch shared some of the individual stories and the metanarratives of the mountaintop mining conflict to give students a sense of how the parties make meaning of their experiences in relation to the conflict. For example, she told the story of Judy Bonds, the daughter of a West Virginia coal miner who *The Washington Post* described in her obituary as “a leading voice of the grass-roots resistance to mountaintop strip mining” (Brown, 2011).<sup>4</sup> While caucusing, students imagined their characters’ needs, interests, and positions, given the stories they had heard through other preparatory activities, and they shared the stories they had developed for their character through the journaling exercise. The caucusing session afforded students the opportunity to compare stories, to discuss similarities and differences, and to consider why perceptions of their characters might be similar or different. Finally, the documentary *Deep Down* reinforced the metanarratives introduced by Hirsch and offered additional stories of individuals living in a community that has been adversely affected by mountaintop mining. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Bonds died of cancer in Charleston, West Virginia on Jan. 3, 2011.

next section, I provide a detailed description of *Deep Down*, and I examine its importance in the role-play activity.

In this chapter I focus on two of the narrative activities used to prepare students for role-play, the documentary *Deep Down* and the journaling exercise, because students identify them more than other narrative activities as components of the role-plays that aided their efforts to understand and connect with their own character and with other characters. These narrative activities have different purposes. *Deep Down* offers a look into a community that is similar to the ones upon which the role-plays are based, in that many of the community members have generations-long ties both to the community and the coal industry. This film is screened in advance of the role-plays to heighten students' awareness of the complexity of mountaintop mining conflicts within a community; to ensure that students hear the individual stories of these conflicts from those who have experienced them; and to gain a better sense of the ways in which the conflict influences relationships among community members, and the relationships influence the conflict.

By contrast, the objective of the journaling exercise is to provide students an opportunity to integrate the stories they have heard via the lecture, the documentary, and through other research, and to create a story for their character informed by what they have learned. The exercise, which chronicles a day in the life of the person the student will portray in the role-play, creates a space for students to explore the complexity of the conflict, important relationships in the community, and the joys and struggles of the people who live there.

In the following two sections of this chapter, I describe both the documentary and the journaling narrative activities in detail, and I share findings from my research and the literature that support my conclusion that these two activities are central to prepping students for role-play when an objective is to cultivate empathy. Specifically, I present studies that link narrative activities with empathy and evidence from the data I collected that the documentary and journaling activities contributed to students' empathy with their own and other characters in the role-plays.

**Documentary: *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country***

There are other documentaries that tell stories of mountaintop mining in Appalachia and the conflicts that stem from the practice, but *Deep Down* was selected for inclusion in the role-play activities because its focus is less on the politics of the practice and more on the conflict's impact on a community. The documentary as a narrative activity in preparation for the simulated meetings is intended to accomplish three objectives: (a) It offers a model for an Appalachian community experiencing conflict associated with mountaintop mining, including profiles of community members and a sense of how and where they fit into the community; (b) It demonstrates the complexity of the parties involved in the conflict, including their ties to communities that are in conflict with one another; and (c) It presents possible storylines for individual characters and for the community as a whole, which students can adopt or modify as appropriate in the simulated meetings. In this section I provide descriptions of the stories told in the film, and I provide evidence to support the claim that viewing the film as a preparatory

activity for the simulated meetings facilitated the process of students empathizing with the role-play characters, who represent the parties in conflict.

**The story of an Appalachian coal community.** The film tells the story of the small, close-knit community of Maytown in eastern Kentucky that is divided over the practice of MTM, with its focus on two longtime friends who find themselves in disagreement on the question of allowing a mining company access to private land owned by individual community members. Through the stories of these two residents, viewers get a sense of the complex nature of the conflict as it unfolds in one community. They learn, for example, that the community is united by the residents' love for the area's natural beauty, as well as a sense of hopelessness and despair about the poverty that is as much a part of their lives as the mountains. Even though the two main characters hold opposing views on the issue of allowing mining companies access to one's land, they remain friends. Terry Ratliff, who is leaning toward allowing the company to lease his land, is considering it because he is very poor and could use the money, not because he is especially supportive of MTM. In the film, Ratliff explains that although the amount of money (about \$20,000) the coal company is offering for the use of his land may seem insignificant to some people, it would make a huge difference in his life. In Beverly May (whose surname is the basis of the town's name) is a vocal opponent of MTM and tries her best to persuade her friend Terry to deny the company's request, but she understands why he is tempted by the potential financial gain, and she feels compassion for his struggle with this difficult decision.

In addition to providing lenses for viewing the conflict through the eyes of Beverly May and Terry Ratliff, the film includes scenes in which miners voice concerns and fears about losing both their jobs and their way of life if the mines close. In one scene, miners testify at a hearing for a permit request from a mining company to allow heavy trucks to use a particular road for the transportation of coal. Many community members are opposed to this and claim that the heavy trucks cause damage to the roads and are unsafe because the drivers are frequently quite tired. During their testimony, miners base their appeal not only on the claim that mines provide steady, well-paid jobs, but also that mining is a way of life in Appalachia, and it is part of a culture and tradition that has been a source of pride for many. In this narrative, any threat to the continuation of mining, even one as seemingly insignificant as rejecting a permit to use a road, is a threat to Appalachian heritage. Such narratives are common in this conflict.

**Complexity of characters and relationships.** Multiple narratives emerge in *Deep Down*, and because they are born of the conflict in the context of Appalachia, they reflect the broad narrative themes of such conflicts throughout the region. In addition to the threat narrative mentioned in the preceding paragraph, *Deep Down* includes narratives of coexistence and promise for the future. In addition to the friendship between Terry and Beverly, the film focuses on the relationship between Terry and his grown daughter. Although his daughter is not actively opposed to MTM as Beverly is, she questions its value and she expresses concern for the community members she thinks have been negatively affected by it. Despite those feelings, she is not angry with her father for considering the offer from the mining company to lease his land. Terry and his daughter



have a close relationship, and it is clear that she loves and trusts her father, and she would not allow a difference of opinion on this issue to harm their relationship.

Although the film portrays important relationships that endure in spite of the conflict, it also highlights more fragile relationships among community members that are threatened by the conflict. It is clear, for example, that many miners consider Beverly May a traitor, despite her claims to care for them and to want them to have better, healthier lives. In a meeting scene in which miners are testifying, they yell at her that she does not understand, and some strongly imply that she is ruining the community.

In reflection papers and in debriefing sessions, students reported that the film helped them to better understand the lives of those who live in a coal mining community. What they reported most directly is that *Deep Down* revealed the complexity of relationships within a community polarized by conflicts related to mountaintop mining. One student wrote an extensive passage about the film in a reflection paper:

“Thanks to the movie I saw just how difficult the choice is for people there. Many have family that work in the mines and much of the economy of these small towns is tied up in the mining industry. I always assumed that everyone associated with the mines approved of the destruction of the environment, and that they were simply ignorant for choosing to work there. Now I see, through both the film and our simulation, that the reality is much simpler. People need jobs and mines provide them. It is easy to say that mining is evil and should be prohibited but when we see that there is little to replace it makes conversation difficult.”

Another student connected a concept from Susan Hirsch's lecture, overburden (which is the top of the mountain that is dumped into the valley), to points made in the film, and described the effect in a reflection paper:

The film stated that the people of Appalachia are seen as overburden.

Throughout the simulation it was imperative to realize this overburden perspective. Fortunately, this perspective carried on as we stepped into our roles and helped us to really have an understanding of the circumstances that our character was facing.

For both students, the film highlighted the high stakes for people living in the Appalachian communities that are experiencing MTM conflict, and they brought that understanding into the simulated meetings.

Other students wrote in reflection papers that the film helped them to understand the complexity of the conflict, and in particular, it offered them a glimpse into a community where people on both sides of the MTM conflict live. One student described it this way:

The movie made it clear just how complex relationships between different parties can be. It is easy to imagine an evil corporation hovering over a close-knit community, but when the people who rely on that corporation are one's neighbors and family, who then is the villain? Each individual has a different set of opinions and perceptions that may or may not agree with yours, but at the same time they are not the enemy.

Students who participated in *The Last Resort* role-play in Spring 2011 reported in debriefing sessions that watching *Deep Down* challenged preconceived notions they had held about the people involved in mountaintop mining conflicts, as well as general ideas about people who live in Appalachian communities. They said the film gave them a sense not only of the impossible choices faced by many residents in coal mining towns, but also how relationships with family and friends in such communities complicate matters further. They shared that the characters in the film offered models for their own characters in the role-play, and the interactions among characters helped them understand how their characters might relate to one another.

For many students, the screening of *Deep Down* was the first time they had heard about the lives of residents in a coal community from the community members themselves. Although they had already heard (from Susan Hirsch's lecture) and read about some of the struggles faced by residents in communities like the one featured in the documentary, it was a new experience for most students to attach real people to those problems and to hear them speak about the difficulties in their lives. Much of what the documentary screening offers students is the introduction of complex storylines of the conflict that reveal the cultures, traditions, identities, and deep relationships of community members. In addition to this important contribution to students' preparation for a role-play, the film screening provides the related benefit of introducing character models, including a sense of the characters' positioning in the community, and the relationships that shape the characters and their positions.

## **Journaling Exercise**

Creating a “day in the life” narrative for their role-play character was an important part of students' preparations for developing an authentic portrayal of their character. After students received a brief description of the conflict that formed the basis of the role-play, and a description of the character they would portray in the simulated meetings, they were assigned a journaling exercise in which they were asked to write about a day in the life of their character. Included in the character descriptions were links to websites that provided additional information about the character through news stories or organizations with which the character would have been associated. For example, links provided with the character description of Shane Silver, the college activist in *Can We Drink the Water?*, included websites for Mountain Justice Summer and Climate Ground Zero. Mountain Justice Summer is a summer camp that brings together organizers opposed to MTM to learn and plan, and Climate Ground Zero is a non-violent civil disobedience campaign opposed to MTM.

When students received the journaling assignment, they knew some details about their character from the one-page description. For example, they knew whether or not their character had children in the school affected by the water contamination, if their character had direct or indirect connections to the mining industry, and if their character had actively opposed MTM. Using that information as a starting point, prompts in the journaling exercise encouraged students to create fuller, multi-dimensional characters. The assignment required students to write at least 250 words, but many students wrote much more.

In addition to the character descriptions, some students also had the benefit of watching Susan Hirsch's lecture and the documentary *Deep Down* in advance of completing their journaling exercise.<sup>5</sup> When this was the case, students also had information from those sources to consider when writing about a day in the life of their character. In any case, the journaling exercise prompted students to: (a) Reflect on what they had learned thus far about the conflict and the parties involved; (b) Imagine the daily life of the person they would portray in the role-play; and (c) Write a story about one day in the life of that person from a first-person perspective.

The assignment's objective was to nudge students toward a deeper connection with their character by providing the opportunity for them to play a part in creating the character. They were asked both to stay true to what they knew about their character and to be creative and imaginative in their thinking as they described their character's daily activities, their thoughts, and their emotions. For example, a student who had been assigned the role of the principal knew that the principal had a spouse, but no name had been assigned; giving the spouse the name and some characteristics of the student's actual spouse might help that student connect with her character. Even if the student chose not take such a direct approach to connecting with her character, the journaling activity facilitated students' investment in their character by participating in the process of creating a story for them.

The journaling exercise consisted of multiple prompts (see Appendix C) to assist students in the creative writing process. One question in particular prompted students to

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<sup>5</sup> The timing of the activities was left to each instructor, so it varied from course to course.

empathize with their character: *What does it feel like to be you and live a life in your shoes?* By the time students had reached this question, they had already developed an extensive story about their character's daily life, including details about their daily routine, their home, their friends and family, and their job. The final questions offered students an opportunity to reflect on the life they had created for this character through their responses and to imagine what it *feels like* to be that person.

**Character development through journaling.** In conflict resolution, character development in a narrative creates multi-dimensional, complex individuals who act in multiple ways, blurring the lines between victims and victimizers (Cobb, 2003, p. 300). Rothbart and Korostelina conceptualize this as axiological balance, or “a kind of parallelism of virtues and vices attributed to groups” (2006, p. 49). Conflict narratives tend to polarize, which results in attribution of virtues to ingroups and vices to outgroups. Character development introduces moral complexity and helps to achieve axiological balance.

Through the journaling assignment, a student may, for example, turn a one-page description of a pastor from North Carolina who is in West Virginia for a Habitat for Humanity project and is concerned about the impact of the water contamination on his volunteers and the community at large, into a three-page story of a day in the life of this pastor. In one example, a student wrote of meeting with Rev. Dennis Sparks, a real-life pastor in West Virginia who has been deeply involved in the MTM conflict. The student wrote, “At the church, Rev. Dennis greets me warmly and we sit down to chat in his office.” After describing the meeting in which Dennis Sparks warned the pastor that

many in the community will likely view the newcomer as an outsider, the pastor visited the town square and talked to a community member, who “expresses that she doesn’t want to bring any sort of media attention to this issue for fear of the mine being shut down for any period of time.” She told the pastor, “We are barely scraping by as it is, if the mine closed for even a week we might lose our house.”

Through these exchanges, the student demonstrated an understanding that the pastor is torn, and it revealed that the student was beginning to understand the complexity of the conflict. Other details in the narrative, such as the pastor’s success in getting “the old coffee machine to actually work today,” revealed a person who is not singularly focused on the conflict. Although the student got some details wrong, like a comment about taking a cold shower and remembering “the locals who may have not had hot water for months” (in the role-play the water is contaminated, but residents do have hot water), such mistakes did not significantly affect the character development evident in the journal, and to some extent it represented the inevitable missteps that occur as one attempts to empathize with another.

**Student reflections on journaling exercise.** In interviews and reflection papers, students identified the journaling exercise as important to the development of a connection with their character. All but one student who was interviewed spoke about the activity in response to the following question: Were there elements of the role-play activity that made it easier or more difficult to connect with your role? If so, what were those? How did they affect your ability to play your role? In the interview responses, students described the journaling exercise as an activity that prompted them at the outset

to imagine what their character would be thinking and feeling. Some enjoyed the exercise more than others, but all but one student who was interviewed reported that creating a story for their character through the writing exercise helped them to create a connection with that person.

A student who portrayed the school principal Denny Bruno in *Can We Drink the Water?*, for example, spoke extensively in her interview about the ways in which this activity assisted her in connecting with her character.

I created an entire story for him beyond what I was given in class. He (the professor) required us to write something small. He didn't specify the length, so I really went into it, and having a writing background, I started to create this kind of story, conversation, and I realized that I actually saw what kind of a pickle my character was in because he was related to a woman who was working – he was married to a woman who was working - for the mining company. And his own family members – his father and grandfather – had all been miners. And his grandfather was actually a miner, so he was on the ground, had been working on the ground. That created, I imagine, this kind of tie between the character - my character - the principal, and the miners. But at the same time, I realized that my character wanted to protect the children, as well, so he would not necessarily side with the miners, but his family history makes him almost have to side with them. That's when I started to develop an empathy for him.



In this passage, the student expressed an understanding of their character's loyalty to both the students, with whom she was entrusted to protect as the school principal, and the miners, with whom she shared family bonds. Recognizing this internal (and perhaps external) conflict experienced by the character, the student demonstrated a sense of understanding the challenge faced by the principal.

Even students who saw little value in the exercise at the time they completed it later reported finding it useful. One student wrote,

Upon completing the exercise I thought it was unnecessary and a complete waste of time. However, as I look back on the exercise now I understand why it was done and comprehend how it allowed me to further delve into the role of Jamie Ames.

Other students who wrote of the journaling exercise in reflection papers were less specific, but described it as a useful activity for getting into character and shifting perspectives.

The journaling exercise offered students an important opportunity to invest in their character through the process of character development. By writing a narrative for their character, students developed relatively flat characters, who had relationships to the conflict and within the community, but little else known about them, into multi-dimensional, complex human beings who have hopes, fears, ideas, and concerns. This exercise, like other narrative elements, invited students to imagine what it was like to live as their character and therefore facilitated empathy with their character.

## Conclusion

As methods of building empathy, narrative activities - such as the viewing of films, the reading of literary fiction and non-fiction, and the writing of personas or vignettes – have been found by researchers to be effective. In the role-plays I studied, narrative activities had a prominent role in preparing students to perform their characters in simulated community meetings. Of all the narrative activities employed to prepare students for these meetings by helping them to understand and connect with their characters, two activities emerged in my findings as more relevant to students than others in this endeavor. Students reported in interviews, reflection papers, and debriefing sessions that two activities - viewing the documentary film, *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country* and completing a journaling exercise in which they responded to writing prompts to create a story of a day in the life of their character – were especially useful in helping them achieve the objectives stated above.

Each of these narrative activities had distinct purposes in preparing students for the simulated meetings. *Deep Down* was included as a preparatory activity because it offered a model for an Appalachian community experiencing conflict associated with MTM, it illustrated the complexity of the parties involved in the conflict, and it presented possible storylines for individual characters and for the community as a whole. The journaling exercise was included because it offered students an opportunity to reflect on what they had learned thus far about the conflict and the parties involved, it encouraged them to imagine the daily life of the person they would portray in the role-play, and it required them to complete the assignment from a first-person perspective.

In analyzing the collected data, I found that the film both provided context for students, in that it gave them a community with which to identify, and highlighted the complex motives of and relationships among individuals living in a community that is experiencing polarization associated with mountaintop mining conflicts. It also offered storylines that were not found in much of the mainstream discourse on this conflict. Rather than just being aligned with one side or the other, students learned from the film that it was not uncommon for parties in this conflict to have friend and family connections both with coal miners and with those opposed to MTM, even with activists; therefore, the storylines tended to be messier than those that have received the most attention, and knowing the alternate storylines helped students create and perform authentic characters in the journaling exercise and in the simulated meetings. I found that through the journaling exercise, students began to understand how their character fit into the broader community that was brought to life through the film, and they began to gain appreciation for their character's experiences, thoughts, and feelings in relation to the conflict.

Both of these narrative activities assisted students in their efforts to form connections with their characters and form an image of the community within which the conflict they would simulate was taking place. In light of the research on narratives as empathy-building tools, it is not surprising that narrative elements of the role-plays served to cultivate empathy in students with the conflict parties. It is worth noting, however, that these narrative activities were developed as a result of instructors and role-play designers engaging in reflective conversations during the rollout of pilot versions of

the role-plays. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that many role-play activities used in conflict resolution classrooms do not include extensive preparation for role-play, including the use of narrative activities. Therefore, an important finding of this study is that when students do empathize with characters in a role-play, narrative activities in preparation for a simulation are a substantive contribution to empathy cultivation.

## **Chapter Six: Performing Empathy in Role-Play**

Both the literature and my findings establish that empathy is cultivated through narrative engagement. Why, then, is it not sufficient for students to engage with the narratives of parties in conflict to cultivate empathy? Does performing the role of a person in conflict facilitate a unique sense of connection with the character? What is the importance of experiencing a conflict as if one were a party to the conflict, in part through developing a story from that person's perspective, but also through performing, which is integral to role-play?

In this chapter I describe the contribution of performance through role-play to cultivating empathy, and I present findings from my research that support the notion that the element of performance is crucial to understanding how role-play activities cultivate empathy. As such, I explore attributes of performance observed in the role-plays, such as improvisation, suspension and connection with self, and emotion. I also consider the interactive nature of the role-plays, as well as observable shifts in students between more and less authentic performances. Such shifts seem to demonstrate Throop's conceptualization of empathy as experienced in moments (2010); it stands to reason that efforts by students to connect with their role-play character are not linear or fixed, but rather are experienced in moments, like empathy itself. Near the end of the chapter I delve deeper into the concept of momentary empathic connections in the context of the

role-plays I researched, and I argue that such momentary connections are what empathy looks like in performance.

### **Role-Play as Performance**

Although instructors who use classroom role-play activities to teach conflict analysis and resolution skills do not expect students to be actors, playing a role is a type of performance. Elements of performance have long been used as a path to conflict resolution and reconciliation, and an objective of performance-based activities is to develop perspective-taking and empathy (Kafewo, 2007; Shank & Schirch, 2008). Multiple performance-based programs, including Playback Theatre, Forum Theatre, and Image Theatre, are designed to promote peacebuilding. Playback Theatre, as an example, is a form of role-play in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted by a team of actors. Playback has been used to address school bullying and to share stories of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza (“Playback Theatre,” 2015). One important difference between Playback and the role-plays I studied is that it is not interactive with other role-players. Although Playback does employ a participant performance model in which the audience responds to the story that has been told, the interaction does not shape the performance itself in the Playback model. In the role-play activities I studied, unscripted, improvised interaction among community members is a key feature of the activity and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

In the role-plays that formed the basis of my research, students participated in simulated community meetings that were designed to replicate meetings that have occurred in Appalachian communities in response to events like the one at the center of

one role-play, water contamination at a local school that some blamed on a local mining company. In both role-play activities, each student was assigned the role of a character that had been created to represent a person who would likely attend a meeting like the one described in the conflict scenario. Each student received a one-page description of his or her character one week before the simulated meetings commenced. It was the responsibility of each student to portray the assigned character as authentically as possible in the meetings.

Role-play is a particular type of performance, and the role-play activities I researched differ in a few ways from some role-plays used in conflict resolution classrooms. First, authentic interaction among participants is central to these activities, and it is necessary for students to experience the interactive dynamics to meet the learning objectives. As a reminder, in my study I characterize authentic participation as that which is engaged and focused, and is marked by such activities as staying in character and expressing emotions when appropriate. Second, the element of surprise, primarily in the form of new information introduced during the role-plays, is a key part of conflict simulation. Finally, the students' extensive preparation for the role-play is another way it is distinct from other such activities.

**The boundaries of performance.** What does it mean to perform? Schechner writes that performances “mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories” (2002, p. 28). Although one often thinks of performance as something that occurs on a stage, individuals engage in performances on a daily basis. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman defined performance as “all the activity of a given

participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.” (1959, p. 15) In the context of my research, performance was the path by which students gave life to the stories of community members experiencing conflict related to MTM. It was through performance that the role-play characters were transformed from descriptions on a page to people engaged in meeting discussions about substantive issues. By expanding the concept of performance to understand it as Goffman did, the entire role-play activity is a performance, not just the simulated meetings, and students move between the roles they have been assigned for the meetings and roles as students for the debriefing sessions. In this way, the simulated meetings were a performance within a performance, or a space in which students adopted a new role.

Cailliois identifies four categories of play as performance: competition, chance, mimicry or simulation, and dizziness. (1979) Role-play is in the category of mimicry or simulation, along with theatre and make-believe play. The concept of make-believe is important in distinguishing a role-play activity from the roles one plays in daily life (as a teacher, friend, or parent, for example). Schechner defines make-believe performances as those that “maintain a clearly marked boundary between the world of the performance and everyday reality.” (2002, p. 43) In the role-play activities I researched, that boundary was reinforced in part through debriefing sessions at the end of each simulated meeting, when students left behind the character they had been portraying and moved back into the role of student to engage in analysis and reflection. It was challenging at times for students to maintain that boundary; sometimes a student who was playing a role well in a meeting was considered by other students to be antagonistic, and those feelings



sometimes persisted after the meeting ended. One viable explanation for challenges with transitions is authenticity in the simulated meeting, but it is also possible that lines between what was ‘real’ and what was ‘make-believe’ were blurry, making it challenging for students to move between those constructed spaces with ease.

The perception of students as antagonistic or difficult by other students presented one of the most common challenges in these role-plays to successfully transitioning from the simulated setting back to the classroom setting. Sometimes students who were perceived as such were playing their role authentically, but at other times they seemed to want to ‘stir the pot.’ Such a perception was often tied to a sense that the offending student was trying to block the group’s progress toward resolution of the conflict. In some cases, students spoke to me as the instructor during breaks or after class, informing me that one student in the group was preventing them from reaching agreement. Despite the fact that instructors advised students not to focus on resolving the conflict, as it was not an objective of the role-plays, students generally seemed drawn toward attempting to find a resolution. This is not that surprising, given that they are studying conflict resolution, but it is important to remind students that they will benefit more from their role-play participation if they do not try to achieve an unlikely resolution and continually encourage them to focus on portraying their character as authentically as possible. By asking students not to try to resolve this intractable conflict, but rather to experience its complexity, instructors were asking students to engage in something that likely felt uncomfortable and counterintuitive to many of them. It is no surprise, then, given that

discomfort and a cultural bias toward problem solving, that many preferred to look for solutions and got frustrated with those they perceived to be blocking the path forward.

**The embodiment of performance.** Performing in a role-play activity is an embodied act. In her work on embodied ethical decision making, Hervey describes embodiment as “equivalent to a dance/movement therapists’ directive to ‘move out’ a situation, image, feeling, idea or word.” (2007, p. 93) Conceptually, this way of thinking about embodiment is a good fit for the role-play activities I studied, in that students were asked to act out a situation and to express the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of another person. That cannot be accomplished without use of the body. Part of that physical embodiment was activated when students prepared to engage in a simulated meeting by leaving the classroom and re-entering in character. When instructors used this device to help students prepare for the role-play, some students used the opportunity to change something about the way they presented themselves, others seemed to use it as a time to clear their mind or to make a mental shift to the role they would momentarily perform, and still others seemed to quietly endure the preparatory activity. Although it was not possible to know for certain what was in any student’s mind, it was fairly easy for me as an instructor to discern which students were taking the activity seriously and finding it useful, and which were not.

For students who changed their presentation of self, the most common change, based on my observations, was a slight swagger that conveyed an air of self-confidence or a more serious, businesslike presentation. The latter was most often associated with characters who were in perceived positions of power, such as the school principal, the

PTA president, the pastor, or the mine manager. Other characters, such as the activists and community members, tended to be less certain of their place in the meetings, and that uncertainty was reflected in the way they presented themselves. On the whole, they did not seem as confident or relaxed. There were exceptions to this tendency, and the most striking example is a session of *Can We Drink the Water?* in which activists presented themselves in the first simulated community meeting as strong, confident, and unwilling to compromise.

When students gathered outside the classroom prior to entering the room to begin a simulated meeting, instructors were encouraged to lead them through the following short visualization activity to focus attention on their thoughts and feelings as they prepared to leave one space (home, office, or another place) and enter another:

Imagine that you are on your way to the P/TA meeting. Think about those you've left behind for the evening and those you are expecting to see at the meeting. How are you feeling about the meeting? Is there anyone you're looking forward to seeing? Anyone or anything creating anxiety? What do you hope you'll accomplish this evening? Take a deep breath. When you are ready, enter the room and find your table.

The questions in this activity were designed to trigger the process of students feeling and thinking as the characters they were about to portray in the meeting; in this way they engaged students in an activity that encourages empathy in advance of the meeting's commencement. The questions were asked in the first person, establishing an assumption that students are responding in character, rather than maintaining a distance and responding as students about what they thought their characters were thinking and

feeling. The question about what one hopes to accomplish encouraged a cognitive connection, while the question about anxiety encouraged an affective connection. The visualization prompts were similar to the writing prompts in the journaling exercise students completed prior to the first day of the role-play activity; as a result, the questions likely felt familiar and provided a reminder to students of the multi-dimensional character they had developed in their journaling exercise.

When students walked through the classroom door and found their places at the meeting tables, they did so as the characters they would play in the simulated meeting. When a meeting ended, it was useful for instructors to allow students some time to physically and emotionally transition back to their role as a student, and even to offer some guidance with that process, such as encouraging students to take deep breaths, stand up, and/or shake their limbs as a way of representing a “shaking off” of the character. In role-plays generally, and in this role-play in particular, conversations in dialogue sometimes got heated, and it could be challenging for students to move from their role in the activity to their role as student, and back again. Debriefing served to aid that transition, as it provided role-play participants the space and opportunity to reflect on group dynamics and other elements of the meeting. Debriefing sessions were led by instructors and were intended to give students an opportunity to reflect on the experience of the simulated meeting, and to give instructors an opportunity to connect concepts from the course to dynamics observed in the simulated meetings or insights from students. Instructors were provided with questions to generate discussions in debriefing sessions, but the format was open and unstructured.

Given that the role-play was an embodied activity, it seemed useful to encourage students to make that transition physically, in addition to mentally and emotionally. Although it was not written into the original role-play activities, the idea to have students move from one space to another to signify an important transition emerged early as a way for students to clear their minds and embody the new role, whether it is community member or student, into which they were about to move.

Debriefing is widely recognized as a crucial piece of role-play pedagogy (Alexander & LeBaron, 2009, p. 194; Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Pearson & Smith, 1985). In “The Role of Debriefing in Simulation-Based Learning,” Fanning and Gaba contend that reflection on an activity “is the cornerstone of the experiential learning experience” (2007, p. 116). Although most students did not recognize debriefing as important component of the activities in their reflection papers, interviews, or post-tests, many educators consider debriefing sessions as opportunities for reflecting on new insights. Furthermore, as an instructor and observer, I learned a great deal during debriefing sessions about the dynamics of the small group meetings, how students were processing their experiences in the meetings, how they were relating to their own and other characters, what was surprising to them, and what was challenging for them.

**Students’ perceptions of performance.** In post-tests, reflection papers, and interviews, students reported the importance of performing in character and engaging with other students performing in character to forming connections with their own and other characters. Many students reported on the post-test that the performance aspect of the role-play activities was compelling for them. The following open-ended question was

posed to students in the post-test: “What were engaging or compelling points in this simulation for you? What made them compelling?” Of the 108 students who responded to this question, 36 students wrote of the dynamics of the role-play itself – engagement with the assigned character and with other characters through the simulated meetings – as among the most compelling points in the activity. Students identified performance-related experiences such as enthusiasm for the activity, the expression of strong emotions, and active participation by students in the community meetings as contributors to a compelling experience.

The following verbatim quotes from students’ post-tests represent responses that include performance aspects of the role-play:

- “Everyone (in my group, at least) really got into their characters role and stayed in it throughout the entire simulation. People were getting emotional (irritated, enthusiastic, etc.) which really reflects what would happen in real life so it felt like I was really a part of the WVA community.”
- “Being able to play out a discussion about the issue was helpful in making an informed decision on the issue.”
- “Yes, because of the role I had as Jaime my immediate family was impacted which made me harness hostility towards the coal mining companies. Hostility that I did not possess before because I didn’t care enough to!”
- “The ability to step into role and portray those stakeholders.”

- “The enthusiastic participation of my classmates. The more in character they were the easier it was for me to maintain mine.”
- “The role I had was compelling because I was easily able to throw myself in the character’s shoes. The simulation was compelling because everyone in my group PARTICIPATED ACTIVELY!”

One student’s story illustrates the experience of performing the role of another exceptionally well: The student was playing the role of an activist who was opposed to MTM, lived in the community, and had several family members and friends who were miners. The character was loosely based on an individual with whom the role-play’s author was familiar, and the student was provided with news articles about the person upon whom the character was based as part of preparation for the role-play. In her reflection paper completed after the role-play, the student reported that she felt a great responsibility to accurately portray the character she had been assigned. She was moved by the activist’s story, but because she was required to *be* this activist (albeit for a short period of time in a limited context), her connection with the character was pushed beyond feeling inspired; she had to imagine and perform what the activist would be feeling, thinking, and doing in the role-play’s community meetings.

The role-play activities I studied tackled complex conflicts through a performance that required students to move between constructed spaces in order to both portray the characters they had been assigned and to reflect on the simulated meetings as students during debriefing sessions. In multiple data sets (post-tests, reflection papers, and interviews), students identified elements of the performance aspect of the role-plays, such

as portraying a character and engaging in simulated meetings as a member of a community, as compelling and memorable. Subsequent sections in this chapter identify the specific components of performance in role-play that cultivate empathy, as demonstrated through my research findings, including improvisation, suspension of self and connection with self, the expression of emotion, and interaction.

### **Improvisation and the Element of Surprise**

As previously noted, each student received a one-page description of the character he or she would portray in the role-play to prepare for the activity's simulated meetings. The descriptions included such items as the character's role in the community, attitudes toward the practice of MTM, and relevant information about the character's family members. Students did not receive a script to use during the role-plays. Therefore, to more fully develop the character he or she had been assigned, each student drew from other materials, such as the documentary *Deep Down*, readings from *Mountaintop Mining in Appalachia: Understanding Stakeholders and Change in Environmental Conflict* (Hirsch & Dukes, 2014), a lecture, online videos, and articles about the conflict. Students integrated what they learned from the aforementioned sources when they completed the journaling exercise prior to the first simulated meeting. Through this assignment, students developed their role-play characters into complex, multi-dimensional people by describing a typical day in the life of the person they would portray.

Although students prepared extensively for the simulated meetings, they lacked the safety net of a script and had to decide in the moment what they would say and how they would respond to what others were saying. In addition to the element of surprise that



is naturally present in the absence of a script, the role-plays included surprise announcements that were designed to mimic the dynamic nature of real-life conflicts. In one role-play activity, students learn of an explosion in a nearby underground mine, and in the other, they are informed that a community grant is available that would support the economic development they are trying to achieve. In post-test responses, students identified these surprise turns as “compelling.”<sup>6</sup> One student wrote, “I liked the second session after the underground mining disaster and how it shifted the group dynamic as well as each member in the group.” Another reported finding it “compelling” to have “new information introduced over time.”

The improvisation required by these role-play activities frequently required creativity and imagination. As an example, a student who was playing the role of the pastor in *The Last Resort* initiated a brief side conversation with another community member, telling her he missed seeing her in church last Sunday. That improvised moment at the beginning of a meeting moved not only the pastor, but the other students as well, more fully into their roles by performing as people in relationships, living in community. As an observer, I frequently noticed such small gestures that demonstrated or indicated creative thinking.

As an example of a lack of imagination, during a simulated meeting for the same role-play, a student who was playing the role of the resort developer was asked a question about his previous projects. The student hadn’t anticipated the question and was thrown

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<sup>6</sup> In the post-test question, students were asked, “What were engaging or compelling points in this simulation for you? What made them compelling?”

by it, responding, “I don’t know.” During the subsequent debriefing session, before I had a chance to address this as the instructor, other students offered recommendations to the student portraying the developer regarding how he might have responded. One student suggested that in a moment like that, it is best to “make something up because it doesn’t matter if it’s totally accurate as long as it makes some sense.” That moment in the role-play led to an in-depth discussion about the importance of imaginative thinking during role-play, and how it is more important to maintain the momentum of the meeting, and thereby protect the sense of authenticity that is created in that space, than it is to ensure that all claims are completely accurate.

As I discussed earlier in Chapter Four, the imaginative thinking that makes improvisation possible is connected both to empathy and to conflict resolution skills in general. To empathize, one must be able to imagine oneself in the life of another person. Imagination as a skill is key to empathy and is explicitly developed through role-play. With regard to conflict resolution in general, I noted earlier that Lederach maintains that imagination and creativity are crucial conflict resolution skills (2010), and Schirch makes a similar claim in *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (2004).

Not only were students unable to plan in advance exactly what they would say and do during the simulated meetings, they were also unable to plan for what other students would say and do as they portrayed their characters, so they could not prepare responses. Some students wrote about elements of surprise in their post-test responses to the question that asked them to identify what was compelling about the role-play activity. For example, one student responded, “Surprise/creative moments in the simulation –

walk out, prayer,” referring to some of surprising activities that took place within the group, such as students walking out of a meeting in character or the pastor spontaneously leading the group in prayer. In the case of the students leaving the meeting, an alliance had formed between three characters (the miner, the principal, and community member Terry McAfree) that were frustrated that the others in the group would not agree to their proposed solutions to the water contamination problem. They returned to the meeting after several minutes of discussion outside the classroom about how to proceed.

Another student responded to the question with, “somewhat unexpected answers and reactions,” and another wrote, “The reactions that developed were interesting and unexpected. For example, I sensed myself becoming frustrated with the ‘outsiders.’” Although the student didn’t identify the “outsiders,” the characters that were typically considered outsiders included the pastor and the activist in *Can We Drink the Water?*, and the activists and developer in *The Last Resort*. In the role-plays, these characters did not live in the communities in which the conflict was occurring.

The first question I asked as an instructor in the debriefing session following each simulated meeting was, What was surprising to you? The debriefing questions, which are part of the instructor’s guide for the role-play activity (see Appendix F for the guide), were developed after the role-play was piloted in a few classes and were informed by instructors’ observations of the discussion topics that appeared in those early debriefing sessions. Through debriefing sessions with students in the pilot activities, instructors identified elements of surprise and unpredictability, and reactions to those surprises, as important meeting dynamics.

The presence of the element of surprise created an environment that contained numerous possibilities, as the storyline had not been written in advance. I examine the interactive nature of the performances in the role-play activities in a later section in this chapter, but here I will maintain that the unpredictability of the meetings, which is part of the role-play design, created the space in which empathy for characters other than one's own is a possibility. When, for example, the young activist in the role-play shared with community members that tutoring students after school is important to her because the students remind her of her younger brother back home, she likely surprised those who expected to hear nothing from her but condemnation of MTM. An imaginative contribution such as this, that mimics the dynamics of a real community meeting, opens up space for connection and empathy.

Several students identified the miner as the character other than their own with whom they empathized. All but one of the students interviewed identified the role of the miner in response to this three-part interview question: Were there times when you felt connected to another role in the activity? If so, what was that experience like for you? What do you think prompted your connection with that role? Increased empathy with the character of the miner was not an unexpected outcome. For most students who participated in the activities, the miner was the character least familiar to them as suburban young adults, and represented the greatest opportunity for increased understanding and empathy. Furthermore, the miner characters in both role-plays (each role-play includes one miner) were purposely developed as complex roles by the authors of the activities. In *Can We Drink The Water?*, for example, the miner is a parent of a

student in the school with contaminated water that is at the center of the conflict. In *The Last Resort*, the miner is a manager who is deeply concerned about the mine closing as part of a changing economy, and how such an event would affect his ability to provide for his family.

In reflection papers, interviews, and post-tests, students reported achieving a deeper understanding through participation in the activity of the miners' struggles and the pride they derive from their identity as miners. In addition to the student who wrote explicitly about newfound empathy with miners (in a quote that opens the introduction to this dissertation), a student included this insight in a reflection paper:

We, as a group looked at the problems and thought, well this is obvious, coal won't last forever, let's move towards sustainable energy. However, the identity frame of some coal miners does not permit that. It isn't about coal running out to them, and rather, it's about the threat to their core identity.

A student who played the role of Shane Silver, the activist whose interests were directly opposed to those of the miner, reported in an interview to have developed an understanding of the difficulties that miners experience. The student was an environmental activist who identified easily with Shane, but recognized the limited opportunities of miners and other community members:

My situation was, you know, I'm here working and studying, like I have stuff that I would be leaving this community and going back to. People in that community, especially like the miner, they're basically stuck there,

and those are primarily the only jobs available. And so, understanding that what I was proposing would possibly damage that was definitely tough, um, to explain and even come to terms with, you know, ‘cause the person who would be affected is right in front of me...

These quotes from students reveal new understandings that developed while they participated in a role-play activity. Despite the characters they represented in the role-plays – one played the role of a pastor, one an activist, and one a mayor – they recognized something similar in the character of the miner, and they understood that the miner faced unique challenges. It was particularly notable that the activist identified the impact of the miner being “right in front of me,” which supports the idea that such discoveries in role-plays emerge through performance of the characters.

Some students also wrote of the miner character in response to the following question on the post-test: Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM issue? If so, explain in detail. If not, why not? One student reported a change of “greater understanding & empathy for miners & those who support them.” Another wrote that they still opposed mountaintop mining as a practice, but they better understood the economic needs of miners. Still another reported a greater understanding of safety concerns for miners through participation in the role-play, writing that they understood that MTM is less hazardous for miners.

The improvised nature of the role-play performances led to surprises throughout the activities. These surprises created the potential for empathy, in large part by challenging students’ expectations and requiring them to respond. In addition,

improvisation opened up space for making connections, and some students used the freedom to improvise as a way to develop their characters in relation to the community.

### **Suspension of Self and Connection with Self**

Many students reported that, depending on the role they were assigned in the activity, it was enormously challenging to temporarily set aside their own thoughts, feelings and opinions in favor of those they imagined were held by the character they were portraying. In Chapter Four I drew upon the concept of self-forgetfulness, which describes the act of considering another in favor of oneself for a period of time. The level of difficulty associated with such a transition depended to some extent on the distance between oneself and the character one was assigned. Students wrote in reflection papers and expressed in interviews that they experienced a stronger sense of connection to the character they were portraying in the role-play when they perceived little distance between their own thoughts and feelings and those of the character. That perception was frequently characterized through a distinction between a student's own perspectives on the conflict and the imagined perspectives of a student's character.

In an interview, a student who represented the pastor in *The Last Resort* explained that he felt most comfortable in the role-play when he was doing things that felt familiar. However, he also shared that he had to work hard to identify with someone so unlike him, and through that process, he felt more connected to the pastor. Although other students may have felt similarly, no other students expressed such feelings so explicitly. Other students did, however, note challenges in connecting with their character. The notion of benefits associated with the challenge described by this student aligns with the concept of

‘desirable difficulty,’ which is the idea that “introducing difficulty into learning improves long term performance and transfer.” (McDaniel & Einstein, 2005, p. 1) Although this is not a concept that has been applied by scholars to the cultivation of empathy, it merits consideration of how it might apply. Earlier I described some students’ resistance to the challenge of portraying a character in a role-play, and the research on difficulty and learning supports the idea that such a challenge may provide long-term educational benefits.

In another interview, a student who represented the activist Shane Silver in *Can We Drink The Water?* reported that at one point during the role-play he engaged in a shouting match with the student portraying miner Harlie Mayford. During that experience, he said he felt most like his character, but least like himself. It required a suspension of self for the student to participate in the role-play in what he perceived to be an authentic performance of his character. To communicate in an impassioned way that is consistent with one’s character indicates an understanding of the character’s struggles. When the character’s emotions and stake in the conflict are revealed to be quite different from the student’s, the student’s authentic performance of the character signifies the cultivation of empathy.

In a reflection paper, a student who played the role of the mayor in *The Last Resort* described her deepening connection to her character’s life as time went on: “Our town was becoming more real in my head,” she wrote, “I could picture the poor roads, the dust on the cars, the sounds of the explosions, but I could also see the ‘main street’ part of the town as well.” Such sentiments similarly indicate a suspension of self and a



temporary mental adoption of the community in which the role-play takes place as one's own town. The description of the town in the student's reflection paper reflects the town that was created through discussions during the role-play's simulated meetings. The elements of the town were based on research from multiple sources, such as the documentary *Deep Down*, articles, and websites, but they came to life when students performed their characters and connected with the characters' lives.

Because the role-play activity *The Last Resort* was the centerpiece of a one-credit elective course, many students who took the course did so because they had at least some interest in the MTM conflict. Some in that category had developed a recent interest as a result of participating in the role-play activity *Can We Drink The Water?*, while others were committed activists opposed to MTM. A student with a background in environmental activism would be expected to require much less suspension of self in the role of the activist than would a student who was generally supportive of coal mining or takes no position on the matter. However, when a student who had actively opposed MTM was cast in the role of the miner, the need for suspension of self was expected to be great. Likewise, the potential for increased empathy with miners was also great as the student had the opportunity to see miners in new and unexpected ways as a result of portraying the miner in the role-play.

In one interesting example, a student who was involved in the anti-MTM movement joined the one-credit course that featured *The Last Resort* after another student who had taken the course and was also active in the movement suggested it to him. He played the role of the miner, and he performed it well. In his reflection paper, he revealed

that he was surprised by the ease with which he was able to embody that role, and he imagined it might have been due to his familiarity with the positions of miners, despite his disagreement with them on the MTM issue. He shared in his paper that he had had some concerns during the role-play that he was making the case for his character too well, and that he might convince students to support MTM, which was contradictory to his real-life interests as an activist opposed to the practice. This case illustrates the complexity of the idea of suspension of self by highlighting how unsettling it can feel to a student.

The suspension of self is always incomplete, as one cannot simply set the self aside for a designated period of time. Much of what motivates an individual and informs thinking and decision-making does not reside in conscious thought, so one may not be able to clearly distinguish what is self and what is character somewhat informed by self. Still, through students' reports in reflection papers, interviews, and post-tests, it is evident that these role-play activities challenged students to contribute perspectives to the simulated dialogue that are not based on their own ways of thinking about the topic. A student who played the role of activist Shane Silver in *Can We Drink the Water?* reported in a reflection paper that playing that role was daunting because, "I knew I had to be a little more aggressive and passionate, two things that are out of character for me." Another student who played the role of miner Harlie Mayford in the same role-play wrote, "For most people in my group (the group of students playing the role of Harlie), being assigned a role that supported the mining companies was a challenge, as our values and beliefs naturally inclined us to be against the mining companies."

Of all the roles in the activity, the role of the miner was the most foreign for the majority of students (I was not aware of any students who had known a miner or had had any experiences that provided them with a sense of the experience of being a miner). Not only did the role represent an unknown experience, but most students who had an opinion on the question of MTM were opposed to it, so although students had not had direct experiences with coal miners, many associated them with a practice to which they were opposed. In pre-tests, students were asked, What is your opinion about MTM? Of the students who responded to the question, 90 reported that they were “somewhat opposed” or “strongly opposed” to mountaintop mining, 32 had “mixed feelings” or did not know enough about the practice to form an opinion, and 9 were “somewhat supportive” or “strongly supportive” of mountaintop mining. In post-tests, students were asked, What is your opinion on the use of MTM by the coal industry? Of students who responded, 68 reported that they were “somewhat opposed” or “strongly opposed” to the use of mountaintop mining, 44 had “mixed feelings” or did not know enough to form an opinion on the use of mountaintop mining, and 18 were “somewhat supportive” or “strongly supportive” of the use of mountaintop mining. Students’ positions on MTM shifted from the beginning to the end of the activity, and the post-test responses indicate that students were less polarized by the end of the activity. The reduction in polarization may reflect the students’ increased understanding of the complexity of the conflict and empathy with the parties involved.

On the other side of the suspension of self is a connection with self, or at least some part of one’s own experiences, and several students reported employing it as a way

of identifying with their character. I interviewed a student who played the role of the miner in *Can We Drink the Water?* In the role-play, the miner is a single parent who has a child in the school that has contaminated drinking water. In the interview she described how much it helped her to connect with her character by drawing upon her own experiences as a single parent. Those experiences, she said, helped her imagine how difficult it would be to feel torn between her child's health and safety, and her own job, which she relied on to provide for her child. "As a parent," she said, "my immediate thought was, you know, I empathize with this man or woman's need to put food on the table." When she caucused with the other student who would play Harlie, the miner, in another meeting, she said she realized they differed on how much being a parent would affect Harlie's approach to the conflict. Although the other student believed Harlie would be singularly focused on keeping the mine open, the student I interviewed thought that Harlie's concern for her daughter's well being would result in her feeling torn. "Any parent would know," she said, "that they would take that very seriously into consideration despite whatever job they have." These students' experiences highlight the varying degree of challenge that students experience when attempting to understand and accurately portray a character, a struggle that many students identified in debriefing sessions.

In another example of connection with self, a student who played the role of the mayor in *The Last Resort* reported in her reflection paper that during the six-week simulation, she experienced a blending of her character with herself. "Another contributing factor to my comfort with Mary-Lou (the mayor)," she wrote, "is that I

learned to comfortably let Laura (name changed) become a part of her.” She added that at the beginning of the role-play, she regularly asked herself if the things she was saying were realistic and made sense, which made it difficult to embody her character. This changed when she allowed herself to be her version of Mary-Lou and stopped engaging in constant self-questioning about the authenticity of her performance.

Students expressed frustration when they were portraying a character, such as the president of the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA), with whom they had difficulty connecting. In debriefings, students identified this difficulty as stemming from an absence of experience with the position. Although there were at least a few students who encountered such a challenge with each of the roles, certain roles seemed to present a greater challenge than others in this regard. In addition to the role of the president of the PTA, students frequently noted the role of the principal of the school as being challenging to portray for the same reasons that they had difficulty connecting with the PTA president. Although students were not asked this question directly, it is possible that the two aforementioned roles were particularly challenging because they were perceived to be authority figures. From comments students shared during debriefing sessions, it seemed that much of the discomfort some students had with these particular roles is that they felt there was an expectation that they do something about the situation, and they did not know what to do because they had no real-life experience in the position of a principal or a president of a PTA.

A role-play is a balancing act in which participants try to disconnect from their own lives in order to move into the lives of their characters, while also drawing upon

experiences in their own lives as a way of connecting with their character. Because one cannot really cease to be oneself, a role-play participant's life experiences will influence how the participant portrays the character. But students in my study described what might be called a "sweet spot" of role-playing; that is, they wrote and spoke of a sense of merging with the character, or at least of merging with what they understood the character to be.

### **Expression of Emotion**

*"It wasn't as easy to remain rational when I was in the actual role-play with the other characters." – student playing the role of Denny Bruno (interview response)*

Displays of emotion provide observable cues that indicate a fuller, and potentially more authentic, performance of a character. Because the role-play activities I studied engage students in dialogue on highly contentious and emotional topics, it is expected that students who have connected deeply with their characters will express emotions during the simulated meetings. In post-tests, students reported as "compelling" the emotions that were expressed during the role-play activities. One student wrote that what was "compelling" was "the fact that real emotions were involved." Another wrote, "People were getting emotional (irritated, enthusiastic, etc.) which really reflects what would happen in real life so it felt like I was really a part of the WVA community."

Through observations of multiple iterations of the two role-plays I studied, in addition to reviews of audio and video recordings of the simulated meetings, I identified the following common expressions of emotion: frustration, anger, relief, excitement,

happiness, and surprise. These emotions were enacted through facial expressions or gestures, tone of voice, speech patterns (such as interruptions), and body language.

Facial expressions can be difficult to decipher, but Ekman identified the following six emotions that he maintains are recognized in most, if not all, cultures, even if the meanings of the gestures may vary across cultures: happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, surprise, and fear. (2003) In *Unmasking the Face*, Ekman presents a photograph for each emotion expressed through a facial gesture. (2003) Through observing the photos, one recognizes that although it is impossible to identify the emotional nuances captured in a facial gesture, there is a near-universal recognition of happiness in a smile and of surprise in a wide-eyed, possibly open-mouthed expression. Studying students' facial expressions was mostly useful in identifying emotions such as surprise and anger. Some expressions were difficult to decipher, especially given that it is not my area of expertise.

In addition to facial expressions, a student's tone of voice provided clues about the emotions a student was experiencing. The most common observable change in tone of voice during the role-plays was a raised voice when the conversation got heated. One situation in which this scenario played out regularly was when a student appeared to feel that she or he was not being heard or was not being taken seriously by others in a simulated meeting. It was also common for students to raise their voices when one student felt attacked by the others, particularly when students in the roles of the activist and the miner reported feeling 'ganged up on,' or when students perceived that one student was being difficult. Dynamics that led to raised voices sometimes also involved insider/outsider relationships. Such examples typically pitted community members

against ‘outsider’ roles, such as the pastor, the young activist, and the developer (in *The Last Resort*). It was common for such exchanges to be initiated by a phrase such as, “since you aren’t from the community.” In one exchange, a student portraying the miner in *Can We Drink the Water?* raised her voice and attempted to re-position herself by asserting, “I *am* a part of the community, as well. I know there has to be other residents here, as well, that are anti-mountaintop mining.”

I identified some expressions of emotion through changes in speech patterns, such as interruptions, heightened enunciation and a quickened pace of speech. As with raised voices, such patterns were most apparent when a group’s discussion had become contentious. In one example from *Can We Drink the Water?*, a meeting participant<sup>7</sup> began to question and make accusations against the school principal, which quickly led to increased tension in the meeting. The participant said, “In regards to the school, it kind of seems like you’re making a deal with the devil, kind of like taking their money and letting them pollute the environment, contaminate your water, and bust up your houses.” The principal responds that it is the miners that will suffer, that the participant who made the accusation doesn’t understand, and that the community doesn’t have the resources to fight the company. I also observed changes in speech patterns when groups were making plans or had experienced perceived breakthroughs. In these cases, the speech patterns were associated with excitement. In one example I saw repeated in several simulated meetings, groups experienced a great deal of excitement, revealed through somewhat

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<sup>7</sup> This exchange is from an audio recording in which it is not clear who is speaking at all times.



quicker speech and affirmations, when planning to have the water tested to identify the contaminants, which they believed would reveal the source of the contamination.

Students frequently expressed emotions through body language, such as gestures, crossed arms, or leaning forward in their chair. Students used body language to express all of the emotions I identified through observations of the role-plays - frustration, anger, relief, excitement, happiness and surprise. Gesturing was a common form of expression in the meetings and was used primarily to convey excitement or anger. In addition to expressing emotion, gesturing was good indicator that a student was engaged with the activity. While observing students during simulated meetings and observing videos of the meetings, I noted that students who used gestures seemed to take the role-play seriously and engaged on an emotional level. Other than gesturing, students leaned forward in their chairs when they were excited (or sometimes to express that they were listening intently), crossed their arms in front of them when they were angry or frustrated, and occasionally engaged in actions like turning away from the group or placing their head face down in their hands. The latter two were infrequent and seemed to indicate frustration, sometimes in character and sometimes out of character.

Many students reported experiencing frustration in the role-play's simulated meetings, and those reports aligned with my observations. Although sources of frustration varied, some students became frustrated at the slow pace of the discussion, especially if there was a desire to reach a quick resolution, and a student in that position might express such frustration by sighing or rolling her eyes. Although the student was displaying emotion, it was not an element of role-play performance if it was clear that the

student was expressing frustration as herself and if it did not make sense for her character to be frustrated with the dynamics of the meeting. Returning to a theme from an earlier discussion in this chapter, students also got frustrated at times with students they perceived as antagonistic. In these cases, the students thought to be antagonistic were frequently portraying their roles authentically, but in a way that slowed progress toward a resolution of the conflict.

In addition to students who were perceived as antagonistic, students who were perceived as difficult led to frustration in some groups. In one example, a student who played the role of the pastor in *Can We Drink the Water?* decided to exaggerate the pastor's outsider status (as a reminder, the pastor in this role-play was from North Carolina and was in West Virginia with a Habitat for Humanity project). In this exaggerated outsider role, the student took control of the meeting and spoke to community members in a way that they thought belittled them. Unsurprisingly, the other students were frustrated by this; some expressed their frustration with sighs, rolled eyes, or knowing looks with other students, while others disengaged.

I observed the frustration in the simulated meetings with the student portraying the pastor, and I confirmed my hunches through brief conversations with students. I was the instructor in this course, and I was not unfamiliar with this student's alienation from other students. This serves as an example of a classroom dynamic that can make role-play challenging. Conflicts or strained relations between students may affect a role-play. As an instructor, one way to address such concerns is to assign students who have such conflicts to different groups if possible.

It is difficult to distinguish frustration from anger, and it is frequently not possible to know the difference with certainty. There are certain markers of frustration – found in facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and speech patterns – that differ slightly from those of anger. For example, sighs and eye rolling can be reasonably interpreted as markers of frustration, while raised voices and slamming of fists on tables are more likely to be markers of anger. Although I made some distinctions between anger and frustration as I observed students participating in simulated meetings, I also identified differences between frustration and anger through debriefing sessions, reflection papers, and post-tests.

For some students, connecting with their character's emotions seemed to be one of the most challenging parts of participating in the role-play. Students such as the one quoted at the beginning of this section wanted to be perceived as rational people in the simulated meetings. I was not surprised by this preference, and I believe it stems from a few sources. In part, it is likely a matter of personal preference or level of comfort, and it is unsurprising that some students felt uncomfortable displaying emotions in front of their classmates. Such discomfort is likely compounded when a student belongs to a culture that discourages displays of emotion in public. Moreover, many of the undergraduate students I have taught over the years subscribe to the belief that conflict resolution is best when it is devoid of emotion. Perhaps that is also unsurprising given that much of what they learn as students of conflict resolution is cognitive, such as analytical and practical skills. It is also possible that students consider a rational portrayal of Appalachians to be respectful.

Emotion is not integral to every conflict, but it is likely to be an important part of most, if not all, intractable conflicts, and those are the conflicts on which instructors tend to focus because they serve as a reminder of the need for skilled interveners. Emotion is also necessary for empathy (Deutsch, 2006; Halpern, 2001). The role-plays I studied were based on conflicts that involved strong emotions. To fully understand the conflicts and what they mean to the parties involved, it was important for students to understand the emotions of the parties. In a role-play, that understanding is realized as students embody the characters representing the conflicting parties. Although it was a struggle for many students to connect with their characters on an emotional level, that struggle is part of the role-play experience, and many students did achieve emotional connections.

### **Interactive Performance: Group Dynamics**

One way in which many role-play activities differ from some other forms of performance, such as spoken word poetry (performance-based poetry), is that they are interactive. The interactive nature of the performance is not incidental, but rather, is key to the process of building empathy among participants in the role-plays. Important aspects of the interactions include the elements of surprise and unpredictability (and participants' reactions to those dynamics) and the mandatory nature of the students' engagement in the activities, both of which are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

In the role-plays I studied, interactions took place among at least six individuals who represented parties with conflicting interests. The contexts for these interactions in one role-play were community meetings. In the role-play *Can We Drink The Water?*, meeting attendees concentrated on the issue of the contaminated drinking water, with

some attention to the broader issue of MTM. In the role play *The Last Resort*, community leaders gathered to consider the future of the community, with some members focused on the community's economic dependence on coal and associated issues.

As I established earlier in this chapter and in other chapters, the role-play activities in this study are not scripted; students received a one-page description of their character, and they created a narrative of a day in the character's life through the journaling exercise. Therefore, the interactions that occurred during the simulated meetings were unscripted, mostly unplanned (with the exception of plans students might have made when they caucused with other students prior to the meetings), and improvised. In addition to being unscripted, the role-plays are designed to keep students unaware of the other meeting participants until they arrive at the first meeting. This is done to mimic reality, as those attending a meeting of this sort in a community would have no way of knowing with any certainty who would attend (the potential exists, of course, for behind-the-scenes conversations with friends and acquaintances to try to establish who would be there, and there was nothing to prevent students from engaging in those kinds of conversations prior to the first simulated meeting). Although students speculated about who would attend the meeting based on what they had learned about the stakeholders in this conflict, they were not provided a list of role-play characters in advance of the first meeting, and this added to the element of surprise in relation to group dynamics when the meeting began. It is worth noting that many students expressed a lack of appreciation for this approach and shared in debriefing sessions that they would have preferred to know in advance who the meeting participants would be. Although I did not

study this, I suspect that this request is born of the same discomfort that led students to request more information about the character they had been assigned to play in the activity.

Finally, unpredictability was inserted into the activities in the form of new information introduced to students at particular moments in the role-plays. For example, in one activity, participants received a press release after the second meeting with the news that there was an explosion in an underground coal mine in a neighboring community. This new information was placed near the middle of the activity to disrupt what had potentially become a more comfortable meeting. It was not always the case that students attempted to move toward a solution in the second meeting, but it was fairly common, and the news of this event was both unexpected and a reminder of the gravity of the conflict. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students rarely welcomed this interruption, as it tended to slow or derail progress toward a solution to the drinking water problem, and it frequently reinforced divisions among characters that had begun to diminish.

In *The Last Resort*, after the community group met a few times, a new scenario is introduced in which a community member learned about a new community grant program that seemed well suited to what the group was trying to accomplish. Although this unexpected news was not as disruptive to students as was the news of the mine explosion, it altered group dynamics and reminded students of the fluidity of the situation. The introduction of new information was designed to mimic the dynamic nature of real-world conflicts and to help students develop skills, such as reflective thinking, that

are needed to adapt quickly to such changes. Introducing new information during role-play activities added to the sense of unpredictability.

How do surprise and unpredictability affect group dynamics and interactions among participants? In narrative terms, they keep the individual storylines and the overarching storyline of the group that develops during the meeting open to new possibilities, including the creation of an alternative storyline or storylines that do not fit with the ‘problem story.’ (Winslade, Monk, & Cotter, 1998, p. 36). Because the role-play activities are unscripted, the content and course of the meetings are unknown in advance, so participants are responsible for providing much of the storyline.

Another important factor in the interactive element of role-play participants’ performance was the requirement of students to engage in the activities. Because the role-plays were a required component of the courses in which they were housed, students could not opt out without incurring a grade penalty. How did this mandatory engagement affect the activities? Without the option to walk away from the meetings, participants were compelled to find ways to keep communicating and connecting. Instructors encouraged students to behave in the simulated meetings as they would if they were the actual parties in the conflict, which may include temporarily disengaging from the meeting out of anger or frustration. However, the artificial nature of role-play as an activity that is part of a student’s grade made it unlikely that a student would ever disengage entirely (and, in fact, I never saw that happen). The requirement to engage may seem like one way in which the role-plays did not mimic reality; however, it is important to remember that many participants in community conflicts have a similar real or

perceived sense of mandatory engagement. Someone who has lived in the same community for all of his life is likely to be emotionally and financially invested in ways that make it seem impossible to contemplate leaving or even disengaging from a conflict that has a significant impact on his life.

The interactive nature of role-plays set them apart from many other performance-based activities. Recalling my earlier conceptualization of empathy for the CAR field as including a relational component, I claim that empathy is cultivated through engagement with others. In some cases, such as when one is reading a novel or watching a film, the engagement may be with fictional characters, or non-fictional characters in a documentary, with which one cannot engage directly. I learned through my study that the interactive role-play dynamics, in addition to the particular designs of these role-plays, fostered an atmosphere full of unpredictability and surprise, which not only mirrored reality, but also opened up space for new possibilities, including empathy.

### **Shifting to an Engaged and Authentic Performance of Character**

Before students participating in *Can We Drink the Water?* engaged in the simulated community meetings in which they discussed the issue of water contamination, they caucused with other students who were portraying the same character. In those meetings students considered their character's values, needs, stories, and strategies. What they sought to understand through the discussion is how their character would interact with other community members in the meeting they would soon enter. This pre-meeting component is important because it tended to affect how students approached the first community meeting. For example, if the students in a caucus were engaged and prepared



for the role-play, the students in that caucus tended to enter the community meetings ready to engage with others from the perspective of the character. By contrast, students coming from a caucus meeting that was disorganized and unproductive in preparing for the community meeting were likely to approach that meeting with a sense of confusion and disengagement. Of course, multiple factors, including a student's personality and degree of preparation for the role-play, also affected the way in which a student approached the role-play's first simulated meeting. Some students are naturally reserved and found it challenging to speak in front of others, including the small groups that represented the community meetings, while others were at ease in such settings, and still others were somewhere in the middle. Similarly, when preparing for the role-play, some students read all materials, wrote an extensive entry (two or three pages) for the journaling exercise, and even conducted research on their own (as reported on the post-tests of a few students), while others completed the minimum requirements.

Some students who were disengaged in the first community meeting remained so throughout the role-play activity, but others seemed to experience a moment or set of moments in which they shifted from a mostly disconnected portrayal of their character to a more engaged and authentic performance. Other students were engaged from the beginning of the role-play, but still experienced moments when the authenticity of their performance visibly increased. Such shifts are subtle, but noticeable, especially by an observer who has seen multiple iterations of the role-plays.

What kinds of experiences fostered such a shift? Experiences frequently involved conflict within the community meeting. In such cases, students shifted toward engaged,

authentic performance when a view they expressed was challenged or something about their character was criticized. For example, it was not uncommon to see the character of miner Harlie Mayford criticized in the meetings by other participants for appearing to be more concerned about her job security than about her child's health. In such moments, it was also not uncommon for the student representing Harlie to move deeper into an engaged, authentic representation of the character, in part by discussing such things as the difficulty of being a single parent and her concern that she will not be able to provide for her child if the mine suffers financial losses and worker layoffs.

In addition to conflict, the formation of alliances in a meeting tended to prompt similar shifts in students, especially when an alliance was initiated by a student who was already performing his or her character in an engaged, authentic manner. Shifts prompted by this dynamic were likely to occur when a student who had an idea for action, such as protest or a potential solution, would attempt to connect with a perceived ally to gain support for the idea. For example, in one early iteration of the activity, a student who was portraying the activist in *Can We Drink the Water?* talked with fellow activists in a caucus meeting and encouraged them to stage a protest with him. Although some students found it amusing when the activists protested, their action shifted the dynamics of the activity, and in particular, it increased the stake of the activists in the conflict and in the outcome of the role-play.

The shifts that occurred during students' performances in the role-plays were most pronounced in students who entered the role-plays with little enthusiasm or sense of authenticity in their performance. For such students who later engaged in a role-play in a

more authentic manner, many did so in reaction to conflict that emerged in a simulated meeting, especially when the conflict involved their character. In addition to conflict, some students shifted toward a more authentic performance of their character when alliances among characters formed to take action or propose solutions. Although the reasons for the shifts varied, the events that prompted such shifts occurred as students performed their characters in the role-plays, and they occurred through interactions in the simulated meetings. Hence, the interactive element of performance seemed to facilitate students' fuller engagement and authentic portrayal of their characters.

### **Performance Challenges**

Not all students felt comfortable with the performance aspect of role-play. Although some students welcomed the opportunity to engage in a classroom activity that was experiential and more interactive than many, for others it felt unnatural to perform the role of someone with whom they perceived to have little in common and had difficulty connecting, and some students did not have an interest in performing or engaging at all. For those students who felt uncomfortable performing their character, the absence of a script and the demand for improvisation likely heightened their discomfort. Although students did not ask for a script, many asked for more information about their character, the scenario, and the broader conflict both during the role-play and during an informal evaluation conducted at the conclusion of the activity. When asked in the evaluation what would improve the activity, at least a few students in each class reported that additional information would make them feel more prepared to participate in the activity and portray their character well.

In “Death of the Role Play,” Alexander and LeBaron argue that although using role-plays as a method for teaching conflict resolution skills is unlikely to end anytime soon (despite the gloomy prediction in the article’s title), role-plays do present significant challenges for some students and may impede learning (2009). Particularly with regard to performance, they contend that adequate preparation is key (for example, discussing the purpose of the role-play and discussing cultural stereotypes), as well as assigning participants roles that have some resonance with them. They are clear that, “this does not mean that participants must be assigned roles like those they play in real life” (Alexander & LeBaron, 2009, p. 193). In fact, they maintain, as do many others (myself included), that an important objective of role-plays is to provide participants the opportunity to take the perspectives of others or to empathize, and that is lost if participants are playing a version of themselves.

Creating a balance between comfort and the discomfort that frequently accompanies initial steps toward perspective taking and empathy is a challenge for instructors. However, giving students an opportunity to participate in the creation of their character by developing a character narrative can facilitate a connection or resonance with the character. As noted earlier, many students reported that completing the journaling exercise increased their sense of connection with their character. In this way, narrative and performance elements of role-play complement one another, as narrative elements may prompt the development of a more comfortable and more authentic performance of character.

Similarly, caucus meetings provided students with an opportunity to prepare together for the simulated meetings. In these meetings, students learned how other students perceived the same character, and they were able to discuss similarities and differences in those perceptions, encouraging continued engagement with the character that they began to more fully develop through their journaling exercise. Students who struggled with the journaling exercise, or were generally struggling to connect with their character, may find the caucus meeting to be a source of support and ideas.

## **Conclusion**

Performance is what makes role-play distinct from other experiential activities, and students identified the performance element of the role-plays I studied as a meaningful component both in post-tests and through post-activity reflection papers and interviews. They wrote about it and spoke of it in ways that highlighted the experience of portraying their character, sharing that interacting with other students in character in the simulated meetings was an important part of what made the role-play a powerful experience.

Through observing the role-plays and reviewing the data, including audio and video recordings of the role-plays, reflection papers, post-tests, and interviews with students, I discovered ways in which empathy is cultivated both for one's own character and for other characters through performance. In particular, I learned that improvisation, the expression of emotion, the suspension of self and connection with self, and the interactive nature of role-play were important factors in cultivating empathy in students

who reported or demonstrated empathy with role-play characters during or after the activities.

The interactive nature of the role-plays, which took place in groups of at least six students, provided the context for other elements of performance, such as improvisation. Key components of the group dynamics that affected performance included students' lack of awareness of other meeting participants until the first meeting began, and students' mandatory participation in the role-plays (by virtue of being a student in the respective course). These components reflected realities of communities struggling with mountaintop mining conflicts, inasmuch as the identity of participants in meetings like the ones that were simulated are not always known in advance, and the opportunity to disengage from the conflict by leaving the community is often not a viable option for community members. The group dynamics created by these components in the simulated meetings facilitated students' movement toward a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by their characters.

The improvisational aspect of the role-plays presented students with opportunities to be surprised and to potentially learn new information about their own character and other characters, which opens up space for the cultivation of empathy. The role-plays were not scripted, so although students received some information about their characters, such as the character's role in the community and position on MTM, they added dimensions to their character informed by research, and they had to imagine how their character would perform in the moment as the meetings unfolded. Constructing the role-

plays this way led to many surprising moments, and in those moments students sometimes discovered information that led to strengthened connections.

Displays of emotion, key to almost any type of performance, connected students with their own characters, as they felt and expressed the frustration, sadness, or relief that their characters would likely feel, and sometimes connected them with other characters. Students expressed emotions through facial expressions, tone of voice, speech patterns, and body language. Students frequently reported feeling frustrated during the role-plays, and depending on the source of frustration, they expressed that feeling through such means as body language (eye rolling) and speech patterns (sighing while another student was speaking). It was a challenge for students to connect with and perform the emotions of their character, but because they were portraying parties in conflicts that were highly emotional, it was vital for students to try to understand the emotions involved and to bring those emotions into the simulated meetings to the greatest extent possible.

The suspension of self, an observable struggle for many students, is an important element of performance in which one attempts to temporarily set aside one's own preferences and typical ways of engaging in favor of what one imagines to be those of the character they are portraying. Some students reported a distancing from their own views as they began to better understand the characters they were portraying. Although some students found it challenging to suspend their beliefs during the simulated meetings, a few others who were familiar with MTM conflicts found it surprisingly easy to set aside their own views and adopt those with which they disagree, if for no other reason than that they knew opposing views well from their experiences with the conflicts. Other students

portrayed characters with which they shared something in common, and those students drew upon those commonalities or shared experiences as they attempted to understand and portray their characters in the simulated meetings.

There are many ways in which one can glimpse into the world of another. Stories presented in films, literature, live performances, and other narrative forms offer a glimpse, as do conversations with individuals or groups who have had experiences that contrast with another individual or group. Among these options, role-plays, and particularly those designed like the role-plays I studied, offer a unique and powerful alternative to get close to experiencing the life of another. Through the challenging, sometimes frustrating, but also sometimes rewarding, experience of performing in the role of another person in the context of conflict, participants have the opportunity to better understand a conflict by better understanding the parties involved. Such understanding, which develops through a connection with the characters in the role-play, begins to form when participants first learn about the conflict and the parties involved, it grows as they are introduced to the character they will portray and as they create their character's narrative, and it deepens as they perform the character in a meaningful role-play activity.



## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

The cognitive element of empathy, or perspective taking, is a crucial aspect of most CAR approaches. The ability to understand and acknowledge another's perspective on an issue is often a first step toward finding a solution to a conflict. Taking the perspective of another does not mean that parties agree on what the conflict is or how it should be resolved, but rather means that they can view the conflict as another person views it. To draw from a personal example as a way of illustrating this process, as I learned more about MTM, including the perspectives of individuals in communities that are affected by it, I gained a greater appreciation for those who see their fates as inextricably linked with the fate of MTM, and I gradually understood how they view conflicts associated with this practice. In fact, I would claim that I empathize with them. That does not mean I will join them in fighting to retain the practice of MTM. It does mean that I have a much better sense of their fears, concerns, pride, and anger in relation to MTM conflicts, and it means that when I think about those conflicts and possible ways of addressing them as a practitioner, I think about real people who may be adversely affected by proposed solutions, rather than about the conflict in a detached, abstract sense.

Through studying two role-play activities that simulate conflicts related to the practice of MTM in Appalachian communities, I found that narrative preparation for role-

plays and performing the characters in the role-plays contributed to the cultivation of empathy in participants. Previous studies sufficiently established that role-plays are useful tools for cultivating empathy, and those findings aligned with my general observations as an instructor who employed role-plays in my courses. I doubted that the experience of participating in a role-play induced empathy in all participants, but both the literature on this topic and my students' informal reports of increased empathy, through reflection papers and debriefing sessions, convinced me that some students gained empathy skills through participation in role-plays.

What I failed to find in the literature on role-play and empathy, and what I wanted to understand through my study, was *how* empathy is cultivated through role-play activities. Although one could reasonably argue that empathy is somewhat neglected as a topic in the field of conflict resolution, its importance is implicit in frequently used conflict resolution practices, and some scholars and practitioners have engaged with it more explicitly (Bowers & Moffett, 2012; Broome, 2009; Della Noce, 1999; Deutsch, 2006; Frei, 1985; Gopin, 1997; Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012). Despite references to empathy in the conflict resolution literature, there have been few studies of the phenomenon. As a result, the field lacks a clear understanding what it is and how it is cultivated. With this study, I sought to diminish the existing gap in the literature of the field by contributing research that examines the cultivation of empathy in the context of role-play activities in undergraduate conflict resolution classrooms.

The role-plays I studied were developed for undergraduate conflict resolution courses at George Mason University, and one of the role-plays was used with students in

an undergraduate conflict analysis course at Grinnell College. The role-plays were multi-day activities consisting of a preparatory session, simulated community meetings, and debriefing sessions. To investigate the ways in which empathy was cultivated in students through the role-plays, I analyzed students' reflection papers, pre-tests, and post-tests that were collected as part of the UELP, a grant-funded S-CAR project that developed multiple experiential activities for undergraduate CAR courses.<sup>8</sup> I also observed the role-plays as they were occurring, and I later watched video recordings and listened to audio recordings of the simulated meetings and debriefing sessions. Finally, I interviewed a select group of students who had exhibited signs of empathy during the simulated meetings or debriefing sessions.

Through the analysis of these data, I found that two narrative activities used to prepare students for the role-plays, as well as the act of performing characters in the simulated meetings, figured importantly in the cultivation of empathy in those students who reported or exhibited increased empathy with their character or other characters in a role-play. In Chapter Five I presented the literature on the contribution of narrative activities, such as written character development, to the cultivation of empathy, and I shared my findings of student reports through reflection papers and interviews that the journaling exercise, in which students write about a day in the life of their character, and the documentary *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country*, which portrays life in an Appalachian coal mining community, helped them to connect with their own

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<sup>8</sup> Although the reflection papers were associated with data collection for the UELP, I wrote the prompts for the reflection papers for my students. Other instructors who used the role-play activities in their courses used similar prompts, but each instructor modified them somewhat to fit his or her own course objectives, in the spirit of academic freedom.

and, in some cases, other characters in the role-play. In this chapter I revisit my findings and consider their importance for the field of conflict resolution, the questions they raise, and the gaps that remain in understanding empathy and its cultivation.

### **The Importance of Empathy in Conflict Resolution**

Despite the challenges inherent in grappling with a concept that reflects an internal state such as empathy, it is necessary work if conflict resolution scholars and practitioners are going to engage with empathy in a meaningful way. Because empathy and related concepts are referenced implicitly and explicitly in CAR scholarship and practice, the field benefits when these concepts are clearly understood and rigorously conceptualized. Currently, when empathy appears in CAR literature, its meaning is either assumed, or it is described in a way that does not fully capture its complexity. Moreover, some scholars have valid concerns about the way empathy is understood and engaged, and those concerns need to be addressed by the CAR field because of empathy's role in several prominent CAR practices, such as dialogue.

Perspective taking is a key component of empathy, but empathy is a blending of both the cognitive (understanding how another person thinks about something) and the affective (understanding how another feels about something). Deutsch refers to this blending of cognitive and affective as “the fullest level of empathy” (2006, p. 61). Empathy is central to the success of such conflict resolution processes as facilitated dialogue and problem solving workshops. In dialogue, participants share their perspectives and feelings related to the issues being discussed, and emphasis is placed on listening and understanding participants with perspectives that differ from one's own. To

that end, facilitators ask clarifying questions and use strategies like reframing to help ensure that dialogue participants understand the feelings and perspectives that are shared as the individual who is sharing understands them (Schirch & Campt, 2007). In part, what will likely surface in a well-organized dialogue is an understanding among participants that they have different perspectives informed by different experiences.

Problem solving workshops, as conceived by Burton and Kelman, follow the interactive problem solving approach, which is also known as unofficial or Track Two diplomacy (Kelman, 2010). A key difference between this approach to conflict, which is grounded in social psychology, and official diplomacy is that conflict is perceived as “intersocietal rather than merely interstate, suggesting processes that go beyond political agreements to achieve resolution and reconciliation” (Pearson d’Estree & Babbitt, 1998, pp. 186–187). To achieve that end, the workshops engage “influential but unofficial” participants in a process designed to help them to “better understand their shared problem” (Fisher, 2009, p. 332). Although problem solving workshops differ from dialogues both in the process and who participates in it, both practices encourage participants to empathize with one another (Pearson d’Estree & Babbitt, 1998).

Several years ago I facilitated a dialogue on immigration in which a participant recounted his story of migrating to the United States from Mexico thirty years ago. Later in the dialogue another participant revealed that he had never heard an immigrant tell their migration story as the other participant had, and that hearing the story helped him to understand that perspective. To reiterate a point I made earlier, it is unlikely that hearing a single story and gaining a new understanding of another’s perspective will lead to a

drastic change in one's position on an issue. However, in the context of a facilitated dialogue, the formation of new perspectives increases the likelihood of openness to options for resolution that may have seemed impossible earlier.

Much of the relevance of my dissertation's contribution to the field rests on the understanding that empathy is woven into CAR theories and practices, but it has been largely ignored in the research. This study, by investigating empathy with a narrow focus, offers a detailed conceptualization of empathy drawn from multiple literatures and from my findings. There is more to learn about empathy as it relates to the CAR field, but my hope is that this study offers a starting point for a richer discussion of the concept.

### **Empathy Cultivated through Role-Play Activities**

Role-play activities are frequently used, in CAR and in other fields, as a tool for cultivating empathy. In the field of medicine, nursing and medical students engage in role-plays with actors or other students to increase their empathy with patients (Halpern, 2001). Psychology students also use role-playing to improve their empathy skills (Poorman, 2002). In the CAR field, undergraduate and graduate students participate in role-plays that simulate conflicts, and one objective of such activities is to present students with the multiple perspectives on the issues that comprise a conflict, especially an intractable one, and to encourage them to carefully consider the various cognitive and emotional approaches to a conflict.

In my study, students identified both narrative and performance elements of the role-play activities as important to their understanding of and connection with their own and other characters. They described performance in the role-plays as 'compelling' in

post-tests (in response to a question asking what parts of the role-play participants found to be compelling). In response to that question, students wrote of the experience of being in character and interacting with fellow participants as if they were community members, rather than students in a classroom. Through analysis of the data and review of the literature, I learned that the elements of performance that contributed to students' increased empathy with their own and other characters included improvisation, the suspension of self and connection with self, expressions of emotion, and the interactive nature of role-play.

Students reported that they found one of the narrative activities, the journaling exercise, to be helpful in their efforts to understand and connect with their character. This finding fits with literature on empathy induced through narratives, as well as literature on the use of character vignettes, or short biographies, as a way of helping role-play participants to connect with characters in advance of a role-play activity (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Keen, 2006; Poorman, 2002). They further reported that viewing the documentary *Deep Down* provided a context for the community meetings in which they would participate, and helped them to understand the people who live in such communities and may have deep connections with the coal mining industry. In the subsequent sections I offer further details on my findings regarding the importance of narrative and performance in role-plays.

**Narrative preparation for role-plays.** In preparation for participation in role-play activities, students engaged in several preparatory activities, including a written description of the conflict and the assigned character, a lecture on the MTM conflict by

Susan Hirsch, a chapter in a book by Susan Hirsch and Frank Dukes, a caucus meeting with students portraying the same character, short articles and videos made available to students through the website Blackboard, and the journaling exercise and documentary film screening mentioned earlier. Of these activities, I focused on the journaling exercise and the documentary film screening in my analysis for two reasons: (a) The literature supports the claim that narrative activities such as these correlate with increased empathy, and self-reports from students confirmed that these activities warranted analysis; and (b) These are the two activities students identified as being important to their efforts to understand and connect with their characters, which were initial steps toward perspective-taking and, ultimately, empathy.

It is clear in the literature that empathy can be induced through narrative activities, such as reading literary fiction and writing short biographies. In the role-plays I studied, narrative activities were used to prepare students to participate in simulated community meetings. Students who demonstrated empathy identified two narrative activities, the journaling exercise and the film *Deep Down*, as important contributors to developing empathy with their own and other characters.

**Cultivating empathy in the moment through performance.** I found that although narrative activities were useful in preparing students for role-play and initiating connections to the parties in conflict represented by the characters in the simulated meetings, the acts of embodying and performing characters in the meetings contributed importantly to the cultivation of empathy. The role-play activities included elements that encouraged students to embody the characters they portrayed, such as an exercise just



prior to the simulated meetings in which students physically leave the classroom to engage in a brief visualization activity before returning to the classroom in character. During the role-plays, some students used props, such as buttons associated with anti-MTM activist groups or clothing that seemed appropriate for a school principal, as a way of deepening the experience of embodying the character.<sup>9</sup>

### **Best Practices for Cultivating Empathy through Role-Play**

All role-plays are not equal with regard to their ability to cultivate empathy in participants. Because role-plays are so commonly used in CAR classrooms and in other conflict resolution training, such as training for mediators, it is important to distinguish between those that are designed to teach particular skills or highlight aspects of a particular conflict, and those that are designed to immerse students in a conflict and achieve multiple objectives. Through this study and through my experiences as a member of the UELP, I have identified the following best practices for role-play ecosystems, especially when objectives include immersing students in a conflict and developing perspective-taking or empathy skills.

- Brainstorm role-play experiences. In advance of a role-play activity, engage in a brainstorming session with students to reflect on their prior experiences with role-play, identifying which elements of those prior role-play activities have contributed to a positive learning experience for students, and which have contributed to a negative experience.

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<sup>9</sup> Another role-play activity developed by the UELP that was not included in my study simulated a United Nations meeting, and students who participated in that role-play were strongly encouraged to dress as if they were attending a UN meeting.

- Choose real-life conflicts for role-plays. The role-plays I studied were based on contemporary conflicts that students could easily research.
- Select intractable conflicts for role-plays. Simple conflicts that can be resolved with relative ease do not allow students sufficient time to engage deeply with the conflict and the parties involved.
- Include characters that may take on the role of conciliator. Such roles offer CAR students the opportunity to practice skills, and it has the potential to prevent the meeting conversations from getting stuck.
- Create incentives for participation in the role-play. Ensuring that something important is at stake for students will increase the likelihood of full participation and a meaningful experience for students.
- Role-plays should be written by knowledgeable authors. Although students may be unfamiliar with the conflict, and therefore may not detect inaccuracies or inauthenticity, it is more likely that the role-play description will include the nuances of the conflict and the characters will represent all the relevant parties in their complexity if the author has had experience with the conflict.
- Prepare students adequately to participate authentically in role-play. It is important to most students to feel as prepared as possible to portray their characters in a role-play. I found in my study that two forms of narrative preparation contributed to students' empathy with the characters they portrayed and with other characters.

- Create characters capable of constructive engagement. Many of the characters in the role-plays I studied were derived from actual parties in the conflicts upon which they were based. The characters had overlapping interests and relationships, which increased their ability to engage constructively with other characters.
- Create opportunities for instructors to reflect and adapt. Revisiting role-play activities regularly and making changes based on new information or new scholarship keeps the activities relevant.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One challenge of studying empathy is knowing when it is present. Unless one is conducting neurological experiments in which changes in brain activity can be measured (and even then it is not certain), the detection of empathy relies largely on self-reports from subjects and close observation of students' behavior in role-play. Recalling the distinction between dispositional and situational empathy<sup>10</sup>, it can be more challenging to measure situational empathy because the tests that have been developed are designed to measure dispositional empathy. Tests of dispositional empathy measure research participants' abilities to, for instance, as understanding how others are feeling, and they are used in research to detect differences in empathy among groups of people and changes in levels of empathy following an activity designed to induce empathy. The

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<sup>10</sup> Dispositional empathy is believed to be innate, while situational empathy is that which is induced in response to a particular situation.

empathy test that was included in early pre-tests and post-tests for the role-play activities in this research was a test of dispositional empathy.

As this research project developed, the dispositional test was replaced with a test that asked participants to identify the positions and feelings of the parties involved in the conflicts upon which the role-plays were based, both before and after participating in a role-play. The new test reflected a theory that if participants' level of empathy with the parties increased as a result of participating in a role-play, they would more accurately identify with the parties' positions and feelings in post-tests. In the end, however, the new test did not prove to be useful, as it was difficult to establish a baseline or expected changes in responses with much precision. The lack of an established test to measure changes in situational empathy placed some limits on my ability to make claims about increases in empathy as a result of participation in a role-play. This was not a severe limitation, however, as my research focused on how empathy is cultivated through role-play, rather than whether it is, because my review of the literature convinced me that the question of "whether" had largely been answered, while the question of "how" remained.

In addition to the constraints embedded in the challenges of detecting or measuring empathy, this study was limited by two other factors. First, it was limited to a small degree by my lack of involvement in the creation of pre-tests and post-tests that were administered to students who participated in the classroom role-play activities. Second, it was limited by difficulties with successfully contacting and conducting interviews with students. The first limitation resulted in pre-test and post-test data that were less useful than they likely would have been if I had developed my project in

concert with the development of these measurement tools. The second limitation was largely a factor of students' busy schedules; I had difficulty reaching the students I wanted to interview, and scheduling interviews with those I reached. It is difficult to know if conducting more interviews would have affected my findings, but there were students I wanted to interview who were not available.

All studies are conducted in conditions that are less than perfect, but on the whole the limitations I encountered in my research did not significantly affect my ability to make discoveries that are useful and relevant to the CAR field. To some degree, the challenges I encountered with regard to detecting empathy prompted more extensive research on empathy than might have been required otherwise, and I contend my dissertation is better for it. In particular, my research on empathy as a complex concept that has been studied in multiple fields led to an understanding and conceptualization of empathy from which CAR scholars and practitioners can draw and apply to their work.

### **Further Research and Recommendations**

My research centered on role-play as the means through which empathy may be cultivated, in large part because it was through my development of role-play activities as a UELP member and use of role-play in my classrooms that I recognized the potential of role-play to cultivate empathy, even in intractable conflicts. As I have discussed my research with others, I have been invariably asked about alternative ways of cultivating empathy, and how role-play compares to alternative methods, such as reading literature or engaging in conversation with a person who has different life experiences. Although I studied the use of narratives in cultivating empathy, and what I learned extends beyond

the use of narratives in role-play activities, I am mostly unable to answer that question. The unanswered question represents a gap in our field regarding research on cultivating empathy, and the field would benefit from further research. The role-play activities I have described, including the best practices I have identified for role-plays designed to cultivate empathy, are not practical for use in all situations in which there is a need for empathy. Therefore, a need exists for future research on additional methods for cultivating empathy, and perhaps a comparison between such methods and role-play.

An entire chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to one of my key findings, the importance of narrative activities to prepare participants for role-play. Of the multiple narrative activities used for preparation, including a book chapter and video clips, I focused on two, the documentary *Deep Down* and a journaling activity, which I found contributed to increased situational empathy in those who expressed or reported it. My use of role-play in the classroom rested on the premise that it was the best alternative to either taking students into the field or bringing speakers from Appalachian communities who were experiencing MTM-related conflicts into the classroom, in order to provide students with opportunities to engage in conversations with those who were experiencing the conflicts directly. It would be useful to compare field-based learning to classroom role-plays to learn if students are more likely to empathize with parties in conflict while in engaging in one or the other.

I attempted to take students in the one-credit simulation course on a field trip to an Appalachian community, but university bureaucracy thwarted those plans. I did, however, lead a summer service-learning course with undergraduate students in

Charleston, West Virginia. Of our two weeks in Charleston, only a small portion was devoted to studying MTM, but we did tour Kayford Mountain, which was owned by a now deceased anti-MTM activist and is adjacent to an active MTM site, and we attended an annual coal festival. Students were particularly moved by our visit to Kayford Mountain and surprised by the passion of Larry Gibson, owner of the property. A student who had recently moved to the United States from Togo identified similarities between the way Gibson spoke of the land that had belonged to his family for generations and the meaning of the land for the Togolese people. Our time in Charleston confirmed my hunches about the value of taking students out of the classroom to meet and interact with people experiencing conflict, but I also remain convinced that role-play can serve as an excellent alternative.

In the previous section, I described the challenges embedded in studying empathy, and I explored in some depth the challenges of detecting and measuring empathy. Although tests have been developed to measure dispositional empathy, the best methods that exist for detecting situational empathy – empathy that results from inducements in a particular situation – are narrative self-reports and the identification of expressions of empathy through observations. The latter is challenging unless the researcher has training in recognizing the kinds of subtle changes in body language, facial expressions, and voice that may indicate the presence of empathy. The former is easy for a researcher to recognize, but the validity of self-reports may be challenged by others. I maintain that self-reports of empathy are valuable, in that recognizing a shift in one's own thinking or feeling about parties in a conflict represents a move toward empathy, even if the reporter

has not achieved full cognitive and affective empathy. Still, further research that continues to develop empathy as a concept and seeks methods for detecting it would benefit the field by enriching the scholarly conversations on empathy.

### **Final Thoughts**

I am convinced that countering a simplified understanding of empathy is important to the work of conflict resolution scholars and practitioners. Empathy, as I understand it now, requires effort, and it is often an ephemeral experience. When packaged that way, empathy loses some of its appeal. Even as a limited experience, though, it offers great potential for shifting the perspectives of parties in conflict. Cultivating empathy through role-play activities and other means is a valuable approach to resolving conflict.

In addition to offering findings on narrative preparation for role-play and the importance of performing characters as crucial to cultivating empathy, this dissertation presents a comprehensive system of role-play for instructors of conflict resolution and other fields. The introduction of such a system has the potential to initiate important conversations about the pedagogy of role-play and change the approach of instructors to such activities.



## **Appendix A**

### **Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) For Intermediate Courses**

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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 it 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 in 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 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.

### **Denny Bruno, Principal of Shady Creek Elementary School**

As the principal of Shady Creek Elementary School, your first concern is always the well-being of the students. The school has faced many difficulties; most of them stem from its remote location and the general poverty of communities in the coalfields. People mean well and want to educate their children, but they have few resources and the low tax base in the county means that the school has only the basics. When you found out about the reddish-brown water, you acted immediately to protect the children by issuing the order for them to bring bottles of water to school. You hope that the water will clear up on its own, which is not an unreasonable expectation, because the well that serves the school and other houses in the vicinity has been contaminated briefly in the past with the muddy water that comes rushing through the after a storm. You've asked a County Commissioner to look into getting the school onto the municipal water system, but he told you that it would be prohibitively expensive and couldn't happen any time soon. You come from a family of proud miners, and your spouse works at the regional office of the mining company in the city where you both live about 30 miles away from Shady Creek and farther from the mines themselves. You and your spouse are both nearly certain that the MTM blasting did not cause the contamination, as the water in this area has had problems on and off for years. Your spouse has asked you to steer clear of any accusations against the mining company, as there could be repercussions for actions taken by your school. Also on your mind is the modest amount of money that the coal industry contributes to the county school fund; to be fair to the coal companies, and to continue the good relations between the companies and the schools, you wouldn't want to launch an investigation prematurely, especially if it could make the industry look bad. You are concerned about the upcoming P/TA meeting, as you know that many people from the community will come and express a variety of opinions.

<http://www.facesofcoal.org/>

### **Terry McAffree, 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)

**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 the 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 families 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. 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 that 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 the 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>

<http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/3141>

### **Pastor J.C. Settle, North Carolina resident in the area as a volunteer**

You're a pastor from North Carolina whose church is planning to conduct a Habitat for Humanity building project in Shady Creek next spring. You've come to the community for two weeks to make plans for the group's work. The situation with the water at Shady Creek Elementary School concerns you because your group was planning to eat lunch at the school each day during the volunteer trip. The area is very impoverished, and there are no local restaurants or hotels. The group will stay 30 miles away in the city and drive in each day to renovate a house for a needy family. You've been surprised at the quite different reactions you've had from people in the Shady Creek community when you've brought up the issue of the school's water. Some people think it would be better not to give the problem a lot of public attention; others seem to want to use it to get some action from the mining industry or the county government. You are beginning to understand why the regional director of Habitat mentioned that you might want to "stay out of the MTM controversy" as it was "explosive" in some parts of Appalachia. You caught up on the issue by reading the blog of Charleston journalist Ken Ward, Jr. As a pastor you generally try to bring people together in times of crisis and wonder if you have a role to play in this situation, and you put in a call to Rev. Dennis Sparks who has made some efforts to mediate mining conflicts. You've learned from experience that, even though you are showing good will as a volunteer, community members might see you as an outsider. You've been concerned for a long time that this part of Appalachia is extremely poor and that the coal industry might not offer much opportunity for the future even though it is a powerful actor in the region. It's hard to know how to solve the water problem. You wonder if you might look into finding a donor who could help or a grant.

<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coaltattoo/>

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10220/1078592-455.stm>

**Shane Silver, Anti-MTM Activist**

You live down the road from Shady Creek Elementary School in one of the houses in the encampment known as “Anti-MTM Ground Zero.” The exhilarating experience you had at Mountain Justice Summer last June led you to take a term off college to continue working against Mountaintop Removal Mining. In addition to your political activities and your chores around Ground Zero, you also volunteer to help the local community. Several students from Shady Creek Elementary come to your house for tutoring after school. You had wanted to organize activities that would give you more contact with local residents, but the hostility towards anti-MTM activists from some in the community has meant that some offers of help, such as the encampment’s offer to clean up the stream bed, have been declined. Some people interpreted the community reaction as evidence that outsiders just aren’t welcome; others said it was the activists’ position against mining that was making them unpopular with local people. Even some of the locally-born activists are skeptical about the role that anyone from outside the region, such as yourself, might play in a community conflict. You don’t have any worries about drinking water, as the encampment is at the very end of the pipes that bring water from the municipality, which is about 30 miles away. When the problem in the school first arose, one of the Ground Zero activists suggested that the group make a daily run up to the school with large containers of water. A heated discussion revealed divisions among group members over whether it was better to provide water or allow a crisis to provoke change; the decision was made to allow the community some time to sort it out. You continue to pay close attention, as you are sympathetic to the children and some parents and don’t want to see anyone suffer. If it were up to you, you’d make the mining company doing MTM pay for extending the municipal water supply out to the school. In moving from Mountain Justice Summer to Climate Ground Zero, you’ve come into a group whose direct action tactics, such as obstructing coal trucks, are designed to get media attention but tend to anger a wide range of local residents. You plan to attend the upcoming P/TA meeting.

<http://www.mountainjusticesummer.org/>

<http://climategroundzero.net/>

**Harlie Mayford, Community resident**

Your daughter Mary Lee attends Shady Creek Elementary School, and you have lived in the community all your life. Your father worked in the underground mine that’s been closed down for many years. Coal mining is in your blood, and you work at an MTM site about 20 miles away. You feel bad about the water situation at the school and don’t like for your daughter to have to carry water every day. But you are worried that the outside activists will blame the problem on the mining industry, which has supported you and your family for generations. Some of your worry comes because jobs in mining are getting more scarce, and you don’t want the company to stop the operation where you work or to have to pay any fines. Besides you’re not convinced that the school’s water

was polluted through either underground or mountaintop mining or some combination as people are saying. Many of the streams in the area are choked with trash and sediment and that could also be causing the problem, especially with the heavy rains lately. At your mine site, the manager told everyone that activists were dumping food coloring into water sources in a bunch of communities just to get people upset and ready to blame mountain top mining. Not many miners live in your community, so you try to speak up for the industry when it's attacked and have recently joined Friends of Coal. You find it difficult to talk with the local people who oppose MTM, even though you've known some of them all your life. Your family sticks close to the other mining families who understand what it means to make a living as a miner, but you plan to attend the upcoming P/TA meeting.

<http://www.friendsofcoal.org/> <http://www.wvcoal.com/> <http://www.archcoal.com/>

## **Appendix B**

### **The Last Resort: Envisioning Change in an Appalachian Mining Community General Information**

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.

**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.

<http://www.brecc.com/>



**Role: Local anti-MTM activist**

You've lived in Greenfield your entire life, and you were married for 25 years to a man who spent his life working as an underground coal miner. Your husband died ten years ago, and your quest to save the mountains of Appalachia is as much about him as it is about you, your children, and your grandchildren. He loved the mountains, and you're sure he'd be as heartbroken as you are to see them destroyed by the practice of MTR mining.

Three years ago, you co-founded a local organization that is affiliated with the national organization, Interfaith Power and Light. You were drawn to the organization after reading a newspaper article about it; its mission of moving away from coal and toward alternative sources of energy, as well as its message of caring for creation, appeals to you. Since forming the local organization, you've spent a great deal of time appealing to members of the community for support, writing op-eds, and advocating for wind farms as a viable alternative to coal mining.

As someone who is very community-oriented, you heard early on about plans to develop a resort outside Greenfield. Although you have some concerns about the environmental impact of such a development (?), you are excited about the potential for this project to serve as a catalyst for members of the community to consider the future of Greenfield, and perhaps move toward an economy based on tourism and alternative energy, rather than coal mining.

<http://interfaithpowerandlight.org/2010/06/lorelei-scarbrowe-dont-live-where-they-mine-they-mine-where-we-live/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/business/energy-environment/15coal.html?pagewanted=all>

**Role: Greenfield mayor**

Although you grew up in nearby (name of town), and left the area to attend college in Virginia, you've lived in Greenfield for over 20 years, and after serving two terms on the city council, you were recently elected mayor. Like most communities in this area, Greenfield has a high rate of poverty, and you ran for mayor on a platform of bringing greater economic development to the city.

You are generally in favor of the proposed resort because it will create local jobs, bring tourists to the area, and if all goes well, initiate the development of a tourist industry in the region. However, you know that coal miners in the community are concerned about changes that will come with a stronger emphasis on tourism; namely, that developers,

environmentalists and anti-mine activists will work to limit continued coal mining, in order to preserve the land for recreational uses.

In the past, issues that have had the potential to impact the coal mining industry have caused tensions in the community to rise, and you realize that this project has that potential. You've already heard rumors circulating around town, and you think it's important to find a way to prevent this from spiraling out of control. As a start, you've decided to invite some members of the community who are sure to have an interest in this to an informal meeting, for the purpose of discussing the proposed resort, and more broadly the economic future of the community. You are also inviting the developer to this meeting. You're not sure what will come of this, but at the very least you hope to control the rumors, and at best, initiate a meaningful discussion about Greenfield's economic future, that may lead to a more comprehensive planning process.

<http://www.beckley.org/>

<http://www.register-herald.com/>

**Role: Mine manager**

You have worked in the coal mining industry for 25 years, all of your adult working life, and for the past four years you have managed the (name) mine, a surface mine located approximately 12 miles from Greenfield. Your father and grandfather were also coal miners, and you are proud of your heritage and the contribution of your work to providing a valuable resource.

You recently learned of a developer's interest in building a resort near Greenfield. According to the people you've spoken with about this, the plan is to build lodging and restaurants, and to promote the area as an outdoor tourist destination, especially for hiking, all-terrain vehicle riding, fishing, and whitewater rafting. While you don't have any objection to the development per se, you've heard rumors that anti-mining activists are viewing this as an opportunity to push their agenda to end surface mining altogether. Apparently the developer has some concerns about potential future expansion of the area's mines, and the impact such expansion would have on the resort.

Based on what you currently know, you believe it is important to learn more about the proposed development and how it may impact the mining industry and the community in general. Although you are open minded about the resort project, you are definitely wary of the anti-mining activists, and you think it's important to get in front of a potential controversy.

<http://www.wvminesafety.org/wvcoalfacts.htm>

<http://www.masseyenergyco.com/>

**Role: Developer**

Your company is interested in building a resort, which would include lodging, hiking trails, and ATV trails, on a 100 acre (?) parcel of land just outside the city of Greenfield. The resort would provide a destination for tourists who want to visit that part of the state (the nearby Lost River is a popular whitewater rafting spot), and would offer both rustic and luxurious accommodations. In addition to lodging and recreational trails, the resort would include a day spa and two locations for dining.

The research conducted by your company has revealed that there is a great need for such a facility in this section of West Virginia, and that it is very likely to attract visitors who would not come to this part of the state otherwise. You've had a few meetings with the mayor of Greenfield, and some other members of the city and county governments, and they are generally quite supportive of the project and excited about the associated economic opportunities for the area.

Your primary concern in considering whether or not this project will move forward is uncertainty about the potential expansion of nearby coal mines, as well as degradation of the natural resources that provide the basis of the attraction around which the resort will be built. Polluted lakes, streams, and rivers have long been a problem in this area, and although the connection between pollution and the coal mines is disputed, there is enough evidence of a link to cause concern.

The mayor of Greenfield is planning to gather a group of community members to discuss not only the proposed development, but also the economic future of the community more generally. She has invited you to attend the initial meeting.

**Role: Hospital nursing supervisor (husband works in mine)**

As a health care provider and a person who is part of a longtime mining family, you have seen firsthand both the costs and the benefits of coal mining. In your profession, you've seen many men suffer the health consequences of underground mining, but you also understand the pride that miners feel in their work, and the dependence of the local economies on the mining industry. In addition to the mining-related illnesses you witness, your work makes you keenly aware of the high number of people living in poverty in Greenfield and surrounding communities. At times, it makes you angry that mine executives are so wealthy, while the miners and their families struggle to make ends meet.

You are vaguely aware of a developer's interest in building a resort a few miles from Greenfield, and you are cautiously optimistic about the economic opportunities that could accompany such development. You've heard concerns among the miners, however, that the anti-mining activists may use this as an opportunity to push their agenda and try to

close mines, or at least prevent further expansion. Since your husband is a miner, you are concerned about the potential impact the development could have on your husband's job security in the long term.

**Role: Regional activist**

Although both your father and grandfather were coal miners, you have been working tirelessly against the practice of MTM for the past 12 years, ever since you discovered the environmental destruction that results from the practice. You are now the co-director of the organization, and you travel the Appalachian region, and to Washington, D.C., with your message. You have paid a price for taking this controversial position in the heart of coal country – you've been threatened, attacked, and even arrested for speaking out against MTR mining.

A friend in Greenfield recently informed you of a new development there: plans have emerged to build a resort near town, in an effort to bring visitors to the area and create a tourist industry. Your friend has heard rumors that the developer is concerned about the impact of nearby coal mines on the plans, and that the mayor is planning to hold a meeting with members of the community soon to discuss the project and its implications for the community. You decide to contact the mayor to see if it would be possible for you to attend the meeting. Although you don't live in Greenfield, you'd like the opportunity to share stories of what other Appalachian communities are doing to address similar issues. The mayor is initially reluctant to invite you to attend the meeting, in light of rumors that anti-MTR activists will use the developer's concerns as an opportunity to push their agenda. However, you convince that mayor that your presence will not be disruptive, and that you'd mostly like to listen at this meeting to learn more about the local concerns, with the hope that there will be subsequent meetings in which you can play a more substantive role.

<http://www.utne.com/Environment/Judy-Bonds-Coal-River-Mountain-Watch-Mountaintop-Removal.aspx>

<http://www.crmw.net/crmw/index.php>

**Role: Owner, Lost River Whitewater Rafting**

You moved to West Virginia ten years ago from Colorado, where you worked for several years as a whitewater rafting guide. After working as a guide for a couple of years on the Lost River, you started your own rafting company. The Lost River is a popular spot for rafting, and during the dam release period in October, people come from all over the country to experience the thrilling class V rapids.

Through the grapevine, you have heard that a developer is considering a location between the city of Greenfield and Lost River Whitewater Rafting headquarters for a new resort.

Although you offer limited on-site lodging options (several cabins and campsites), additional nearby lodging would likely have a positive impact on your business. You are interested in learning more about the proposed resort, so when the mayor of Greenfield invites you to a meeting with the developer and members of the community who will likely have an interest in the project, you are anxious to attend. Although you are not certain of the affiliation of all invitees, you are aware that a representative of the coal mining industry will be present. Because mining has such a negative impact on the natural resources upon which your business depends, you are glad to know that someone from the industry will be part of this discussion.

<http://www.class-vi.com/>

## Appendix C

### **Stepping into Role: A writing exercise in preparation for *Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community***

**Note:** Please complete the readings before engaging in this exercise.

#### **Introduction**

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 step into 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 will be in the simulation, taking time after having gone through all these questions to begin their writing.

#### **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?

From here I would like you 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: “Its 5am and I can’t believe the hot water heater is broken again and I have to get these kids ready for school.”

## Appendix D

The Rough Guide to Reflection			
Steps	What Happened?	So What?	Now What?
Outline of the Process	Here you are <b>observing yourself</b> in a particular situation. Concentrate on the specific & the particular. So think about questions like these:	Here you are working to analyze <b>how</b> “what happened” in your experience actually happened, and what the experience means for you. You need to “make sense” of your learning experience, in both its positive and negative aspects. So think about questions like these:	Here you are looking forward to work out how you might apply your learning from the experience to new or unfamiliar situations. So think about questions such as these:
Exploratory Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What experience am I thinking about?</li> <li>• How did this experience come about?</li> <li>• What exactly happened?</li> <li>• Who or what helped me and how?</li> <li>• What part was the most challenging? Surprising? Satisfying?</li> <li>• What roles did I find myself playing/ experiencing?</li> <li>• What of myself did I share with others?</li> <li>• Who or what helped</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did this experience mean to me?</li> <li>• What did I understand (or understand more fully) about myself as a result of this experience?</li> <li>• What did I do that was effective? Why was it effective?</li> <li>• What did I do that seems to have been ineffective? How could I have done it differently?</li> <li>• What am I learning about myself and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have I changed through this experience?</li> <li>• How can I apply what I have learned to other areas of my life (academic work, on-campus activities, my community, my personal life)?</li> <li>• How will I apply what I learned from this experience to new situations?</li> <li>• How will I share what I learned with others in the future?</li> <li>• At the conclusion of this reflection, what</li> </ul>



	me and how?	<p>others?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How open was I to new ideas, unexpected learning, challenging perspectives and so on?</li> <li>• What values, opinions, or decisions have changed or developed through this experience?</li> <li>• What revelations hit me during/after the experience?</li> </ul>	goals will I now set for myself, and who or what will help me achieve them?
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## Appendix E

<b>Indicator of Empathy</b>	<b>Empathy Detected</b>	<b>Empathy Not Detected</b>
Display of expected emotions	Student playing the role of an activist: "I care about the children in this community." (Spoken in an impassioned voice.)	Student playing the role of an activist: "I think we should probably close down the mine." (Spoken with intermittent quiet laughter.)
Display of expected body language	A student portraying a miner was accused by students portraying the activist and one of the community members of not putting the interests of her child first. The miner sat back with arms crossed, appearing defensive.	During a conversation in which the activist, a community member, and the pastor talked about the mine's responsibility for the contaminated water, the student portraying the miner sat back, looking down at a sheet of paper.
Display of expected facial expressions	Students portraying the principal, the miner, and the PTA president told the student portraying the pastor that he was not a member of the community and should not be participating in conversations about its future. While they were speaking, the student portraying the pastor kept his eyes down much of the time and maintained a nearly expressionless face, but when they finished he looked up and maintained a pleasant expression as he explained why he cared about the community.	During a conversation about activists' lack of understanding about the community and general lack of understanding about mining and other important issues, the student playing the activist was smiling and appeared to be stifling a laugh.

Display of expected tone of voice	A student portraying a community activist talked about her husband, who had been a miner and had died of cancer. When she spoke her voice was strong and loud, but she wasn't yelling. She spoke slowly and forcefully, with a hint of sadness that indicated a connection with the character's story.	During a conversation about concerns related to the proposed development in which some students portraying community members expressed potential opposition, the developer responded flatly that he would like them to reconsider.
Demonstrate relationship with character	Student playing the role of a Chamber of Commerce member: "Other details and creative aspects developed in discussion fairly easily; for instance, Mike, the mine manager, decided that we were childhood friends. The ease catalyzed my empathy for my characters' values, needs, and interests. For example, I empathized with the goals for helping the community, especially through economic change."	Student playing the role of a community member: "Given Terry's narrative, it structurally reflected Terry's own limited perspective and knowledge regarding the underlying asymmetrical power dynamics. It was difficult for me to limit my own knowledge of the company and bias when trying to put myself in Terry's shoes. The Massey Mining company lacks transparency and responsibility. I think the mining companies destroyed the cultural heritage of the Appalachia and treat the residents as if they could be bought out."
Demonstrate understanding of character	Student playing the role of the principal: "But at the same time I realized that my character wanted to protect the children as well, so he would not necessarily side with the miners, but his family history makes him almost have to side with them. That's when I started to develop an empathy for	Student playing the role of the principal: "When we got the information that there were miners trapped, it might have seemed like everyone's opinion about the mining would have changed, but I imagined that my character would not have suddenly turned against mountaintop

	him.”	mining. Even though the activist was able to use the event as ammunition for her argument, the principal probably would not even think of stopping mountaintop mining as being a solution.”
Express perspectives consistent with character in role-play	Student playing the role of a miner: “If the mine closes, I’ don’t know what I’ll do for work”	Student playing the role of a miner: “I think we should test the water to see if the mine is responsible.”
Express new perspectives consistent with character out of role-play	In response to post-test question, “Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM issue?” Response: “Yes because I drew a connection to my character and understood how MTM could be harmful.”	In response to post-test question, “Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM issue?” Response: “No, my parents live in Tennessee tight down the road from a company that uses MTM. There have never been any issues because the mine is strictly regulated.”
Express new understanding of MTM conflict	In response to post-test question, “Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM issue?” Response: “Yes it helped me to understand the disempowerment of individuals living in Appalachia.”	In response to post-test question, “Did participation in the simulation influence your opinion about the MTM issue?” Response: “No, unaffected by conflict.”

## **Appendix F**

### **Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) for Intermediate Courses Guide for Instructors**

#### **The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project**

##### **ELA Overview**

In this activity, students engage in simulated community meetings that are held in response to the discovery of contaminated water in an elementary school in an Appalachian community. Each student adopts a role and represents a member of the community or an outside party in meetings that are held to address the crisis. The conflict in this role play exercise centers on whether the water has been contaminated by byproducts from the practice of mountaintop coal mining or by other sources and what should be done about it.

Each student is assigned a role by the course instructor, who provides a description of the assigned role and a narrative of the events that led to an initial community meeting. In addition to participating in role in community meetings, students will caucus with other students assigned to the same character. During caucus sessions, students will discuss how to represent their roles in the community meetings. Through participation in this activity, students will learn about community-level impacts of conflicts in Appalachia related to mountaintop mining, practice problem-solving, and gain a greater appreciation for the challenges associated with engaging in community conflict resolution.

The development of each ELA represents the collective effort of faculty and project staff of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. The primary author of *Can We Drink the Water? Simulating Conflict Dynamics in an Appalachian Mining Community* is Susan F. Hirsch with assistance from Gina Cerasani and Arthur Romano.

##### **Role Play Pedagogy**

As a pedagogical tool, role-play activities offer instructors a way of teaching students about complex disputes. Such activities give students a sense of the wide range of emotions experienced by those involved in an intractable conflict and an opportunity to test resolution strategies. As students learn and perform their roles, they develop a deeper connection to the conflict, and through debrief activities they use their analytical skills to further explore conflict dynamics and potential paths to resolution.

Although role-play activities are a rich form of learning, they may be challenging for instructors and students. If role-playing is unfamiliar to students, they may be nervous, which sometimes leads to overacting and playing into cultural stereotypes. Instructors can guide students through such challenges by noting them while observing students engaged in role-play and addressing them in the debrief sessions built into this ELA. The benefits of a successful role-play activity are well worth the challenges, as it affords students a rare opportunity to experience conflict both as a conflict party and as a student.

### 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, they 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 community meetings.

### Resources required:

- Student materials packet for each student
- Name tag for each student
- Flip charts
- Markers
- YouTube Video: [Mountaintop Mining Presentation by Dr. Susan F. Hirsch](#) or a similar lecture about conflict over mountaintop mining in Appalachia.
- DVD: [Deep Down](#)

This ELA requires approximately 5 hours and can be extended to 7 or 8 hours. It is designed to be run over multiple class meetings but can also be run as a full-day session.

## Activity

### One week before the simulation

- Read through the student materials packet, which includes a description of the conflict, descriptions of each of the roles and a journaling assignment, *Stepping Into Role*.
- Assign each student one of the following rules and give each student a Student Materials packet:
  - Denny Bruno – Principal of Shady Creek Elementary School
  - Harlie Mayford – Community resident
  - Terry McAfree – Community resident
  - Jamie Ames – Head of Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) for Shady Creek Elementary School
  - Pastor J.C. Settle – Habitat for Humanity volunteer from North Carolina
  - Shane Silver – Activist against mountaintop coal mining
- Divide the number of students in the class by six roles (i.e., if there are 24 students in the class, four students will be assigned to each of the six roles). Arrange students into groups that include one student from each role. Each group of six will hold its own community meeting during the simulation.
- Tell students to complete the Stepping Into Role assignment and submit it to the instructor before the ELA begins.

### Day 1: Preparing for the simulation

#### Materials needed:

- Name tags with role and a colored dot indicating group assignment
- YouTube Video: [Mountaintop Mining Presentation by Dr. Susan F. Hirsch](#) or a similar lecture about conflict over mountaintop mining in Appalachia.
- DVD: [Deep Down](#)

#### *Role-play discussion (20 minutes)*

Engage students in a brainstorming discussion about their experiences with role-play activities. The idea is to get them thinking about what everyone can do to make the role play a successful learning experience.

- Ask students to brainstorm responses to the following questions:
  - What has worked well when you've participated in a role-play?
  - What has been challenging or frustrating about those experiences?

#### *Introduce the conflict (1 hour)*

- Show students a DVD presentation by Dr. Susan Hirsch on the history and practice of mountaintop mining in Appalachia and the conflicts associated with it. Alternatively, you may use Dr. Hirsch's slides and script to give the presentation yourself or create your own presentation.

- Show students the first 25 minutes of the documentary *Deep Down: A Story from the Heart of Coal Country*. If time permits, you may want to show the film in its entirety.

*Introduce the classroom activity (45 minutes)*

- Distribute the name tags.
- Divide students into role caucus groups. For example, all the students who represent the character Denny Bruno will meet in one group, and so on. This gives students an opportunity to better understand their roles and to strategize with fellow students assigned to the same roles. Post the questions below on a projector or white board and explain that they will have 45 minutes to discuss the questions.
  - What are your values, interests, needs, and positions related to this conflict? Why do you care about what has happened?
  - Who do you think is responsible for what has happened? Who is responsible for taking care of it?
  - What do you think should happen next? What is your role in that process?
- Remind students to answer the questions from the perspective of the character they will represent in the role-play. There may be disagreement within the role caucus groups over the answers. Assure students that this is fine but that they should discuss any disagreements to explore why they have different understandings of their character.

*Debrief (15 minutes)*

- Explain to students that they will likely want to keep some parts of their caucus group discussions private.
- Use the following questions as a guide for the debrief:
  - What was it like to discuss your role with other students who represent the same person? Was anything about that process surprising?
  - Did caucus group members view the role similarly or differently?
  - How did your group work through any differences?
- Give students a brief overview of what will happen in the next session, using the agenda in this guide as your guide.

Materials needed:

- Name tags
- Flip charts
- Markers

Day 2: Simulation begins

Before the session begins

- Arrange tables and chairs to accommodate groups of six.
- Ensure that each student has a nametag with a colored dot that signifies the group to which the student has been assigned.



- Place a sheet of paper on each table with a colored dot to indicate where students should sit. The color of the dot on the table should correspond with the colored dot on a student's nametag.

*Preparations for the session (45 minutes)*

- Distribute name tags.
- Set the scene by providing general information about the conflict using the sheet titled Description of the Conflict. Explain the following to the students:
  - You are about to participate in a Parent/Teacher Association (P/TA) meeting, for the purpose of discussing the contaminated water at Shady Creek Elementary School.
  - You may not have children in the school system or even live in the community. However, because this is a small community with few large meeting spaces the P/ TA meeting is the most convenient venue for gathering everyone concerned about the contaminated water. It is not uncommon in this area for P/TA meetings to serve this purpose.
  - In a moment you will leave the room. When you reenter the room, please find the table with the colored dot that corresponds with the dot on your nametag.
  - Each table is a separate P/TA meeting. The meeting is being held about a week after the note about the school's water went home.
  - Represent your role to the best of your ability and try to be authentic in your portrayal. Think of this as a real meeting. You may want to leave the meeting if you get frustrated, or you may want to meet privately with someone at the meeting. The primary objective is to represent your role well, not to keep the meeting flowing smoothly, or to resolve the conflict.
  - There is no designated facilitator for the meeting. Someone may adopt that position and that can either be accepted or contested by others. (Note to instructors: Students may be frustrated at times by the lack of an official facilitator. It can be helpful to explain to students that this is by design to best replicate a conflict in which the community is attempting to address a problem that has just occurred. Community members may decide that they would like to invite an outside intervener to help resolve the conflict, but it is too early in the process for that to have already happened.)
- Ask students to step outside the classroom.
- Step outside the classroom with the students and lead them through a brief visualization before they reenter.

Use the following as a guide:

- Imagine that you are on your way to the P/TA meeting. Think about those you've left behind for the evening and those you are expecting to see at

the meeting. How are you feeling about the meeting? Is there anyone you're looking forward to seeing? Anyone or anything creating anxiety? What do you hope you'll accomplish this evening? Take a deep breath. When you are ready, enter the room and find your table.

*First P/TA meeting (30 minutes)*

- Students meet in small groups at their respective tables.
- Students engage in a discussion about the conflict and their positions.

*First P/TA meeting debrief (30 minutes)*

- Call 'time' after 30 minutes to end first meeting.
- Ask students to regroup with their role caucus groups.
- Post the following questions on a projector or white board. Ask the students to use them for their debrief discussion.
  - What happened in the P/TA meeting? What was surprising?
  - What are the opportunities for this role? What are the challenges?
  - How did others in the meeting respond to you?
- Provide flip chart paper and markers to each group. Ask students to write the name of their role somewhere on the paper and to write answers to the following questions on the paper:
  - What are your strategies for meeting your needs in this conflict?
  - What do you need from others?
  - Who are your allies and how can those alliances help you?
- When students are finished, they should submit the completed flip charts to the instructor.

*Preparation for the second P/TA meeting (10 minutes)*

- Explain to the students that because the issue was left unresolved in the last meeting, the P/TA is holding another meeting to follow up with the water contamination issue, rather than waiting a month until the next scheduled meeting.
- Before students leave the room for the visualization, tell them that there is breaking news in the community and share the following mine explosion press release with them (students will be provided with hard copies of the news release, or it can be projected on a screen):

**NEWS RELEASE**

At least 24 miners are trapped underground following an explosion at the Big Branch Mine just north of Shady Creek and Dry Creek. Rescue workers are trying to reach the trapped miners but have been unsuccessful so far. The miners' family members are maintaining a vigil at an open-air warehouse near the mine as they wait for news about their loved ones.

Initial reports by rescue workers are bleak and describe the damage within the mine as overwhelming, with machinery shattered.

This explosion occurred in the wake of several documented violations related to methane buildups in the mine. Methane monitors are used to determine when methane levels have become too high and thus might trigger an explosion. In the investigations that led to the finding of documented violations, federal regulators found that methane monitors were switched off or not properly maintained.

- Remind students that their primary objective is to represent their role well.
- Ask students to step outside the classroom.
- Step outside the classroom with the students and lead them through a brief visualization before they reenter. If you choose to lead students through a visualization, you may want to use the following as a guide:
  - Imagine that you are on your way to the P/TA meeting. How are you feeling about meeting for a second time? How are you feeling about the explosion at the mine? Do you know people who have been affected by it? Has it changed how you're approaching the water contamination problem at the school? Think for a moment about what the past week has been like for you, with the continued water contamination, and then the explosion at the mine. What are your hopes for this meeting? What do you think needs to be accomplished? Take a deep breath, and when you are ready, enter the room, and find your table.

*Second P/TA meeting (30 minutes)*

- Students meet in small groups at their respective tables.
- Students continue the discussions from the first meeting and respond to the news of the explosion in the Big Branch Mine.

*Second P/TA meeting debrief (30 minutes)*

- Call 'Time' after 30 minutes to end the first meeting.
- The class as a whole will participate in a debrief facilitated by the instructor.
- Questions for debrief:
  - What went well in this session?
  - What was surprising?
  - What was challenging or frustrating?
  - Did you observe changes from the first meeting to the second meeting? If so, what were they and why do you think they occurred?
  - Feel free to ask additional questions related to theories, concepts, and frames you've discussed in class.

Post-simulation

Assessing Student Learning

There are multiple tools for instructors to use to assess student learning. Some examples include:

- Instructor observation of ELA
- Reflection papers (sample reflection questions in appendix)
- Exam questions (sample exam questions in appendix)
- Research Project Assignment (sample assignment in appendix)

#### Evaluating the Activity

- If you want to collect evaluative information on the activity itself in order to improve it, you could request that students respond to the following questions in writing for class discussion:
  - Did you find the activity to be engaging? If so, how?
  - What did you learn from participating in this activity?
  - What would you keep and what would you change about this activity?

#### Appendix

##### Sample Exam Question

The culmination of this class is the simulation of community conflict in which we have engaged the last three sessions of the semester. In the spirit of your earlier reflection papers, reflect on the simulation and consider how the theories, concepts, models and frameworks we studied in this class contributed, or failed to contribute, to your understanding of the dynamics within the simulation. Be clear in your paper about which theories and/or frameworks were useful in your endeavor to understand the conflict and to participate in the simulation, and which were not. Although you may focus on any piece (or pieces) of the simulation in your response, you may wish to consider the dynamics within your small group, the role of leadership (both formal and informal), or the role of conflict narratives, to name a few possibilities.

##### Sample Reflection Paper Questions

1. What did you learn from the simulation? What do you think were the missed opportunities for learning?
2. Were there parts of the conflict that you struggled to understand? If so, identify them, and consider what might have helped you to better understand them.
3. What was challenging about playing your role and why was it challenging? What was most gratifying and why? At any point in the simulation, did you wish you were playing a different role? (if so, which one, and why that one?)
4. Which theories of conflict facilitated your understanding of the conflict and/or the dynamics you observed in the group? If so, please identify the theories and the phenomena they helped you to understand.

##### Description of the Conflict

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 Elementary School 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 had 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 towns, sits in 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 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 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.

### Sample Research Project Assignment

This simulated community conflict is centered on the controversial practice of mountaintop mining in the Appalachian region of the United States. The purpose of this research project is to engage you in this conflict and its many facets prior to the commencement of the simulation. Your assignment is to select a manageable piece of the conflict and learn more about it. Review the articles and video clips at the links posted at the end of this assignment and look for something about this conflict that interests you. To assist in the research project selection process, here is a list of possible topics:

#### Environment

- Impacts of mountaintop mining on biodiversity
- Water contamination
- Post-mining land reclamation

#### Economy

- Mining jobs and local economies
- Alternative economic activities (tourism, green energy, etc.)

#### Activism

- Dynamics of activist groups ('outsider', community-based, etc.)
- Types of activism (marches, protests, etc.)
- Community organizing This list is not exhaustive; there are many other options and these are offered simply as an idea generator. The topics listed here are quite broad and you will likely want to narrow your focus. To demonstrate that you have completed research in the topic area you have selected, you will create a visual representation of the results of your research. In this assignment, you are encouraged to be as creative as you like. Be assured, however, that your grade will not be impacted by the degree of creativity reflected in your project.

Options for visual representation include, but are not limited to:

- Photo collage
- PowerPoint presentation (no more than 4 or 5 slides)
- A song or poem you've written
- Poster presentation (a variety of items displayed on a poster)

However you decide to present your research findings, you should demonstrate that you consulted a variety of sources through your research (include a list of sources with your final product; a separate document of sources is fine), gained new insights and a deeper

understanding of your topic, and took time to create a meaningful representation of your findings.

### 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 (<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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## **Biography**

Gina Cerasani graduated from Moffat County High School, in Craig, CO, in 1986. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in from the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs in 1996. She worked as a grassroots lobbyist for several years and received her Master of Public Administration degree from George Mason University in 2007.