



Dig Deep: A Water Organization Asking Big Questions

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Abstract

A mom bringing water home in jugs because there's no plumbing. A child writing out schoolwork by flashlight. These images come to us from the United States where over 2 million people live without home access to safe and clean water. In this learning module, students are exposed to the work of George McGraw and his organization, Dig Deep, which brings water access solutions to families and communities in the U.S.

This learning module poses many questions, including the following. Should solutions focus on bringing water access immediately or durably? Should those without water access simply relocate? Would you be more likely to donate in support of a water project or in support of lobbying or advocacy for government to build plumbing infrastructure? Who should pay for water access for those still without?

Rather than focusing on the heroic social entrepreneur, this inquiry instead focuses in on the ethical and structural dilemmas surrounding work on human needs necessitated by long-standing structural inequity. Students who learn through this module will stand in McGraw's shoes and ponder questions with philosophical, political, and foundational implications.

Story Link

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2018/06/21/how-off-grid-navajo-residents-are-getting-running-water/>

Learning Themes

- Impact decision-making and the prioritization of need and intervention
- Economics of community infrastructure
- Understanding the context and economic underpinnings of a social challenge
- Rights, responsibilities, and public or social goods and services
- Social impact and development ethics and power dynamics
- Institutional inequity, racism, and structural barriers

Discussion Questions

1. If you were seeking to improve conditions on the Navajo Nation land seen in this video, what else would you want to know about the context of the problem?
2. In addition to the approach of bringing water into communities without water access and installing cisterns to hold larger quantities and supply plumbing in individual homes, what other possible approaches or solutions might you want to consider?
3. Who winds up paying (paying in terms of poor outcomes, cost of services, lost revenues or wages, etc) for the effects of a lack of water access for a family or community?
4. What are some of the institutional or structural barriers to addressing water access challenges in the United States?
5. If you had been George McGraw and had experience helping address water challenges in South Sudan and Cameroon, then encountered these same water access challenges in the U.S., where would you have started? What would your first steps have been?

6. To what extent would you choose action vs. advocacy or vice versa? Is it more important to provide water access than to advocate for water infrastructure investment by one or more branch of government or is it the other way around?
7. What more would you want to know about water access in the U.S. in order to sway public opinion, public policy, or public investment in water infrastructure and solutions?
8. What are the dangers or benefits of people believing that charity or social enterprise can or should be the answer to public infrastructure challenges in a developed economy?

Suitability

This learning module can be titrated for use with undergraduate or graduate students with the appropriate selection of themes, questions, and assignments by the instructor. At its core, this module has been developed for graduate students, so titration will involve removing some higher-level questions, expectations, and themes according to the instructor's familiarity with their own students.

This module has been designed with the flexibility to spread the content across two separate class sessions with out-of-class reading/viewing/consideration ahead of each. The module's learning builds on itself from one stage to the next. While the module need not take up an entire class time work of discussion, the instructor should use their own discretion as to timing and which aspects to include or exclude according to timing constraints and the nature of the course.

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