Explanation for Simulation of WWI Trench Warfare

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# Why Simulated Learning

 Many students do a better job of remembering things that they experience, rather than just something that is told or shown to them. This idea has been theorized by the likes of Kurt Lewin, Jean Piagett, and John Dewey. It has since been tested and confirmed in numerous studies that experiential, or simulated, learning aids in retention of material.



 For this reason it makes sense that high school students should also be actively involved in their learning. This activity, when performed correctly, can give students a look, although a quite sanitized look, into what some of the hardships were for soldiers in the World War One trenches. The specific learning objective is that students will explain at least three hardships faced by soldiers in the trenches during World War One. This objective could be met with a reading or a lecture, but this simulated activity will have a much larger impact on most students.

# The Nuts and Bolts

 The first key to this, or any, simulation is that the teacher must talk the activity up for days, if not weeks, before the designated day (D-day). I like to build tension and anxiousness in the class by telling them we will be going to war. I do not give them specifics, but I make sure they know that this day will be eventful.

 On the day of the simulated activity, I meet students at the door and ask them to put their bags in the front of the room. Then, when students are seated and the bell rings I immediately explain to them that we will be simulating trench warfare and that they should be trying to discern what soldiers experienced during World War One. This gives their day direction and they know why they are conducting the activity.

 It is important to first cover a few basic rules that apply to all of the simulations we do in class. First, students must understand that safety is the first priority. There is to be no running, jumping, leaping, diving, etc. during the simulation. I make it clear that any violation of this rule will be grounds for immediate removal from the activity. It is also important to tell students at this point that they must heed my instructions. This activity is designed in a very specific way and students must really “play along” to get the most out of it. Also, students must operate on the honor system.

 These few rules aside, it is time to get into the specific simulation. The room is divided into two equal teams. I usually just split the room in half down the center. I pass out two scrap sheets of paper to each student and instruct them to ball it up. This is their ammunition for the ensuing battle. The main rules are as follows:

* The main goal of the battle is for one team member to reach the wall behind the opposing team without being killed. This means that a player from the right team must cross through the left team’s line to touch the wall, or vice-versa. When they accomplish this task they win.
* Paper balls are ammunition, as mentioned. If a player is hit by ammunition they are dead and they are out of that round. They must leave the battlefield. They must play by the honor system here. I also tell them that if I absolutely see them get hit, then I will call them out. I will not call a student out unless I am 100% sure they were hit, and they must abide by my ruling. Also, ammunition can be picked up off the ground and reused throughout each round.
* Boundaries are delineated. I use masking tape to put edges on the battlefield. There is no going out of bounds for live participants. Be sure to leave enough room on each side for players that get hit to congregate outside the battlefield.
* Each side can use the materials they have on their side of the room to create defenses. (This usually consists of chairs and desks, so each side should have an even number of these.)
* Tell the class they have 3 minutes until the first round.

 These directions are admittedly vague, but should lead to a bustle of activity as students scramble to build their defensive lines on their respective sides of the room. As they are conducting their work, I string barbed wire (masking tape) across the center of the room and lay land mines (sheets of paper with the words “No Man’s Land” printed on them) in the center between the “trenches” that should be taking shape by this point. After the allotted three minutes (adjust as needed) I turn off the lights and ask students to close their eyes and lay in their trenches. This settling can take a moment as students are usually riled up by this point, but take the time to get them calm because this is an integral part of the entire activity.

 As students lay in the trenches, read this:

 “During World War One, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, Allied and German forces fought long and bloody battles to gain territory along Germany’s western border, also known as the Western Front. To protect themselves from the constant barrage of automatic gunfire and heavy-duty artillery, each side dug a series of trenches that extended for over 475 miles from Switzerland to the North Sea. The rival trenches were typically about 250 yards apart, although in some places the trenches were so close that a soldier could practically touch his enemy in the opposing trench. The space between the trenches was referred to as “No Man’s Land.” No man’s land was typically gutted by bombs, crossed by tons of barbed wire, and dotted with land mines. Trench warfare consisted of long artillery bombardments followed by charges of infantrymen across no man’s land toward enemy lines. Life in the trenches was dangerous, boring, and terrifying. Soldiers endured a seemingly endless cycle of disease, mud, fear, hunger, and death. Over 10 million soldiers died during World War One. Those who survived the trenches were often profoundly traumatized by the experience.

 At this point I turn on the lights and yell “FIGHT.” Students quickly jump to action. As the first round goes on, it is important to fulfill the job of referee by calling people out that you see get hit and watching to see who the first to reach the other side is. Also, during the battle, call out student who walk or crawl over a paper that reads “No Man’s Land” as it is a landmine, and also call student out who touch the barbed wire. These make it much harder to get across No Man’s Land to fulfill the goal of touching the wall on the other side.

 The length of the rounds can vary greatly, but ultimately one side will win. When this happens declare them the victor, instruct everyone to gather up two pieces of ammunition and return to their trenches. They are then instructed to huddle up, discuss strategy, and make any changes they would like to their defenses. I usually give them about two minutes to do this. Once this has been accomplished, turn off the lights again and tell them to lay in their trenches with their eyes closed.

 As students lay in the trenches, dramatically read this excerpt from Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

 “A shell crashes. Almost immediately two others. And then it begins in earnest. A bombardment. Machine-guns rattle. Now there is nothing for it but to stay lying low. Apparently an attack is coming. Everywhere the rockets shoot up. Unceasing. …I lie motionless; somewhere something clanks, it stamps and stumbles nearer, all my nerves become taut and icy. It clatters over me and away, the first wave has passed. I have but this one shattering thought: What will you do if someone jumps into your shell-hole? Swiftly, I pull out my little dagger, grasp it fast, and bury it in my hand once again under the mud. If anyone jumps in here I will go for him. It hammers in my forehead; at once, stab him clean through the throat; so that he cannot call out; that’s the only way; he will be just as frightened as I am; when in terror we fall upon one another; then I must be first.” (Feel free to toss something loud, but not dangerous, during a well-timed pause during this reading.)

 After a dramatic pause, turn on the lights and yell “FIGHT” again. Referee Round Two as needed. When the round is over declare a winner, ask students to collect two pieces of ammunition each, return to their trench, huddle, strategize, and rearrange as needed.

 When this has been accomplished, turn off the lights and instruct students to close their eyes and cup their hands over their face. Their hands are their gas-masks. Then dramatically read this excerpt from Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

 “The dull thud of the gas-shells mingles with the crashes of the light explosives. A bell sounds between the explosions, gongs, and metal cappers warning everyone, Gas, Gas, Gaas. These first minutes with the mask decide between life and death: is it air tight? I remember the awful sights in the hospital: the gas patients who lay in day-long suffocation cough[ing] up their burnt lungs in clots. Cautiously, the mouth applied to the valve, I breathe. The gas creeps over the ground… like a big, soft jelly-fish… Inside the gas-mask my head booms and roars, it is nigh bursting. My lungs are tight, they breath always the same hot, used up air, the veins on my temples are swollen. I feel I am suffocating.” (Feel free to spray a light mist of a pungent air freshener over the students as you read this excerpt.)

 After a dramatic pause, turn on the lights and yell “FIGHT” again. Referee Round Three as needed. When this final round concludes, instruct students to recycle the ammunition and return the desks to their proper arrangement.

# Debriefing/Reflection (The most important phase)

 As with any simulation, much of the clarity and learning comes from the debriefing, or reflection, phase of the activity. After students have put the desk back in order and returned to their seat there must be some discussion of what they experienced. The goal is for them to share their thoughts on what they just experienced.

 The discussion can be quite open ended if the class is advanced and thoughtful, but some guiding discussion questions can be used, such as:

* What emotions did you feel during this activity? Someone will always say “tense” or “scared” to answer this. I always like to play up the fact that if we can bring tension and anxiety to students in a comfortable high school classroom, then can they even imaging reality.
* What were the difficult aspects of trench warfare? A common answer is that it is “hard to get to the other side.” This adds into the discussion about the amount of time the war dragged on, and the relatively small amount of land that changed hands. I always point to the fact that if I had sent reinforcements in during the simulation, each round could have gone on forever with no side winning.
* How do you think this activity was similar to a WWI soldier’s experience? How do you think it was different?
* Why do you think we did this activity?
* Do you think this is a valid way to learn about trench warfare?

# Possible Extensions

 Time permitting, or for homework, there are a couple of other activities to solidify this activity with the students. If there are 5-10 minutes left in class, or the next day at the beginning of class, you can show the first ~6 minutes of the film adaptation to the book *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It is a dramatic scene of trench warfare. It shows in detail the landscape of No Man’s Land and highlights the way the Germans and the French would charge headlong into machine gun fire from the other side. Students are often left dumbfounded as to why people would participate in this style of warfare, which can also lead to more discussion. Another extension would be to have students write a letter home to a family member or friend from the perspective of a soldier on the Western Front. Either of these activities can add to student understanding.