Introduction

Most Maker Learning happens in the context of math or science classes. It might not seem to fit literature instruction, but we found a niche for it within the study of a novel that could enrich the classroom experience for our boys and help them engage to a greater degree. The 9th Grade English unit on All Quiet on the Western Front, a novel about the harsh realities of trench warfare in WWI, provided us the perfect opportunity to test our hypothesis.

The Research Question

How can the physical recreation of trench warfare during the study of All Quiet on the Western Front improve 9th Grade boys’ understanding of the novel?

Research Context

Montgomery Bell Academy enjoys a 148-year history as a college preparatory school for 700 young men in Grades 7-12, offering a progressive approach to traditional education. MBA provides for its students a determined balance among academics, athletics, and fine arts.

Participants

This action research project involved 29 9th Grade boys who were enrolled in Mr. Reynolds’ English literature course. Having two separate classes allowed us to create the battle dynamic which was central to the project’s success.

Direct hit

You lied to us!

Run away! Run away!

The Research Action

What: Trench Warfare between two 9th Grade English classes

Why: Promoting critical thinking about themes in the novel All Quiet on the Western Front

How: Maker Learning by constructing makeshift trenches from household and found materials

Five Main Themes at Issue: Disillusionment, Camaraderie, Nature of War, Authority, Nemesis

Where: Outdoor battle experience to test maker skills and weapons against the reality of war

Data Collection

Pre-Battle

• Planning

• Terrain video footage

During Battle

• Sniper video

• Handheld video

• Photos and grades

Post-Battle

• Maker video

• Reflection video

• Socratic debriefing

• Student essays and interviews

Key Findings and Discussion

Our action highlighted all of the novel’s five major themes, just as we had hoped. However, the boys’ comments and actions revolved largely around the three themes of disillusionment, camaraderie, and the nature of war. Below are some comments from the boys themselves that relate to each of these themes.

Disillusionment:

• “Our dreams were crushed from the start.”
• “I’ve been preparing my butt off, just to get pelted with water balloons?”
• “I did not realize what was going on, like a recruit. The water balloons came out of nowhere and were a complete surprise just like the bombardments in the novel.”
• “We just did not know what was going on did we?”
• “Wait, what?”
• “The confusion was real.”
• “If we had known that we were gonna get pummeled by balloons, we would have prepared differently.”
• “I felt betrayed; I felt deceived and quite angry.”
• “We were prepared, but not for what really was going to happen. We thought we knew what was going to happen, but in reality we were sitting ducks.”
• “You lied to us!”

Camaraderie:

• “When I got hit and Parker ran away, I felt alone.”
• “We formed friendship by working together and protecting ourselves when we were hit by the water balloons.”
• “When I ran away when Wesley got hit by a water balloon, I didn’t have time to mourn.”

Nature of War:

• “We were expecting to fight the other side, but the balloons came — much like the soldiers who first faced gas.”
• “I felt the surprise attack was not cool. War is Hell and it’s never what you expect. We were basically the recruits from the novel, not prepared for any real combat.”
• “No matter how safe you feel, there is always a way to get killed. You never know when an attack is coming or what it will be.”

Conclusion

The battle reenactment using student-made trench structures pulled the boys into the tactile phenomena of war. Their high level of engagement in the project made the lesson stick, as they demonstrated in essays and conversations days and weeks after the battle. They seemed to discover a clear connection between our reenactment and their study of the novel, especially how vulnerable an investment in war can make its participants, in terms of the physical risks, the psychological toll, and the moral dilemmas. Several of the boys used evidence from their experience in their analytical essays. The value of physically constructing mock war materials helped them become more immersed in the setting and themes of All Quiet on the Western Front.

Further Information

This poster and further information is available at http://www.theibsc.org/. Researchers’ Email Addresses:

elijah.reynolds@montgomerybell.edu
robbie.quinn@montgomerybell.edu