Teachers' Notes

Theme: Life as a soldier
Subject area: The sensory experience of war

Rationale
We use our senses all the time. They are what form our experiences. In this activity, students will explore daily life in the trenches for the soldiers, through the senses, in order to produce evidenced, insightful and thoughtful accounts of the trench experience.

Content

Historical sources:
- Book of poetry - Verses from the Trenches
- Book with photographs - German book of First World War photographs
- Book with photographs - The world war in photographs
- Map - Map showing wet areas of Passchendaele front
- Book of poetry - Jessie Pope’s War Poems

Recommended reading (short article):
Sensuous life at the front by Dr Santanu Das

Key questions
- How do we use our senses? How do they help us to make sense of our environment and circumstances?
- What was the sensory experience of the trenches?
- How did the sensory experience differ for soldiers in different areas?

Activities
1.) Explore with the class the idea of sensory perception and what the different senses can reveal. This can be done in a variety of different ways depending upon the group. One method might be to ask the students to carry out a sensory investigation, perhaps with something like an orange, picking out words to describe the way it looks, feels, tastes and smells. Are there any senses that cannot be used to describe the orange?
2.) Introduce students to war poets such as Jessie Pope and Isaac Rosenberg.
3.) Use Verses from the Trenches to act as stimulus material to discuss the sensory experience of war. Can they pick out ideas, words or phrases that relate to the sensory experience? What do they notice about the way that the poems have been written? Can they find words used for effect or emphasis? What messages are these poems expressing?
4.) Use this as the basis for students’ own poems. Ask students to create a sensory poem about the war emphasising what they feel to be the most important aspects of the sensory experience. For example, for some it could be the squelchy wetness of the mud; for others it could be the noise of the shells. If they would like further inspiration, direct them to the large amount of war poetry on the website. They could also create acrostic poems to define their chosen senses.

5.) Once students have completed their work, you may wish to hold a class poetry recital. Students could choose music and images to accompany their poems and record them.

Extension activities

- Was the sensory experience the same for all? Examine similarities and differences such as the noise and smells across the European countries. One example might be the concrete used in German trenches.