

# Bringing The “Great War” to Life: Supply Line Discovery Box

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Social Studies 11 students pose for selfies in my class, but instead of holding basketballs or bubble tea they are donning WW1 gas masks or passing around trench art – artillery shells turned into artistic vases. There is significantly more chatter, smiles, and excitement than I have seen in previous classes; students are buzzing with questions, inherently interested in each artifact more than my Powerpoint notes or a video clip.

“What *is* this? Is this real, Ms. Scott?”

“This is heavier than I thought!”

“I wonder how you wear this?”

During the era of the Socials 11 Provincial Exam, content was king and it was rare to have the time to explore the essential historical thinking skills with depth. I strived, like many of my colleagues, for student engagement and earnestness to the course. Skills such as *historical significance*, *continuity and change*, or *evidence* were certainly present; however, adequately honing each skill was challenging under such time constraints with an imperative to “cover the course”. With the development of the new curriculum, the opportunity for authentically exploring primary sources became an easier reality and for this I looked no further than our own Canadian backyard.

The War Museum in Ottawa, Ontario provides the opportunity for students anywhere in Canada to handle authentic – as well as replica – World War I artifacts including, but not limited to the following: propaganda posters, service dress, gas alarm rattles, and trench periscopes. Students and teachers may interact with the discovery box for two weeks, engaging in various lesson plans supplied by the museum or with the opportunity to create unique lessons.

In my experience with the discovery box, students truly appreciate the break from primary sources that are document-based. It is as if you have a museum delivered to you – and one that you can interact with the reproduction and authentic artifacts. For many students, access to this kind of evidence is rare.

Using the teacher resource binder, one could use one of the many lesson plans organized by grade level or themes – supported by backgrounders and labels. For example, the lesson “Think Like a Historian” is a great entry point for the collection, but also for an entry to a unit that includes World War I or major world conflicts. In my lesson using the “Think Like a Historian” framework, I distributed the following to each student group: an artifact, a contextual photograph, and an artifact backgrounder. Next, each group made a hypothesis using qualitative and quantitative data such as colour, size and weight, recorded in a chart. At which point, students read the backgrounder and contextual photograph to make some conclusions and predictions about their object and compare with their original hypothesis. Such skills are certainly applicable to a multitude of real world scenarios and professions.



Figure 1: A reproduction of a gas mask worn by Canadian soldiers and other members of the British Empire forces during poisonous gas attacks during the First World War.



Figure 2: Students examine an original piece of trench art; this is an example of a shell casing that was decorated and kept as a piece of art.



Figure 3: A replica wool service jacket used by Canadian soldiers.



Figure 4: A student tests out the trench periscope, imagining what it was like to use this tool.

Given time, students were able to use creative thinking skills to make a conclusion and justify their findings – thinking like a historian. Student-led sharing of each artifact to the rest of the class is essential in this process. This is an opportunity for students to not only share with their immediate peers, but also others. After our class discussion and unveiling of the authenticity of the source, my class prepared a full understanding of at least one artifact to informally present the item to an English as an Additional Language class within our school. It was a chance for the language learners to practice asking questions, but also for our students to take a risk at being an “expert” on World War One, as well as the artifact.

This activity was inspired by a previous year, when my students – on their own volition – tried on all the uniforms, hats, and clothing from the Discovery Box making an impromptu parade down the halls, encouraging students of other courses to come out and engage with the artifacts: the students were “experts”, like walking museum guides showcasing the evidence and highlighting their knowledge of each artifact to their peers. The confidence on their faces was evident. This activity, refined over the years, celebrates students as risk-takers, agents of learning, and facilitators. One could also take the opportunity to present in another form to younger students rather than peers, or even to the community in some way.

I have used this box multiple times, and it never fails to provide a chance for students to “do” history. It is essential for students to understand that history is not static, but dynamic, and up for interpretation as well as adding multiple perspectives to the overall narrative of history. Students understand the impact of new technology and communication during the war, mechanization of weaponry, and the social impact of the war. Ultimately, this was a foundational exercise that reinforced primary source skilled-based learning vis-à-vis World War I. It’s difficult to deny the sheer enjoyment this collection of artifacts brings to the classroom. Authenticity of student reactions truly solidifies this as a source to elevate overall student learning.

## **Bibliography**

“Supply Line,” Canadian War Museum, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/s1/supplyline/>.