

Primary Sources Help to Place Students at the Battle of Vimy Ridge!

Janet Ruest¹

¹ Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, Canada

Throughout the unit on World War One, students use primary source documents. These sources include political cartoons on the causes of the war, propaganda posters, archival photos, movies, wartime art and poetry.⁶⁹ Two of the most consequential resources I have provided for my students are letters from World War One soldiers and the Vimy Ridge giant floor map available through Canadian Geographic Education.



Figure 1. Photo Credit: J. Ruest

⁶⁹ “The Chain of Friendship,” *Causes of WWI: Political Cartoon*, http://schools.yrdsb.ca/markville.ss/history/history/chc_ohasst_chainoffriendship.html.



Figure 2. Photo Credit: J. Ruest

Senior social studies students are introduced to these two resources at approximately the midway point of the World War 1 unit. Students have reviewed background information about the causes of the war and have already studied battles such as Somme, Marne, Ypres. They have learned about the challenges of communications and the typical battlefield tactics. Students are able to discuss the facts of the battles and are able to provide reasoned assessments of the importance of each battle. All of this is important for the study of history, but it is so much more meaningful when students are “invested” in “real” participants.

To this end, I use the Canadian Letters and Images Program based out of Vancouver Island University.⁷⁰ Here, educators and students can research stories of Canadian veterans and their families, thus developing deeper understandings and empathy. The specific the letters I provide my students are of Jay Moyer and his family (Mother and sister [Violet]).⁷¹

I print out the letters on tan paper using Lucinda Handwriting font. Both tend to give a sense of historic authenticity to the letters. Students read several of the letters starting with March 26, 1917 a letter from Jay to his mother; March 29 Jay to his sister, Violet; April 6 Jay to Violet; April 13 Violet to Jay – here she asks if he was involved in the battle of Vimy Ridge; April 24 Violet to Jay wondering about battles; April 26 Mother to Jay asking about his involvement in Vimy Ridge and hopes that he will come home soon; May 1 Violet to Jay talking about the tremendous battles taking place and that it had been over a month since his last letter reached home. They expected 2-3 letters from him in the next mail... By now, the students are heavily invested in the Moyer family and are

⁷⁰ Vancouver Island University, *The Canadian Letters & Images Project*, <https://www.canadianletters.ca/>.

⁷¹ Vancouver Island University, “Moyer, Jay Batiste – Letters,” *The Canadian Letters & Images Project*, <https://www.canadianletters.ca/collections/all/collection/20725/doc/221>.

wondering why Jay hasn't written. It is at this point that I tell them that Jay died on April 9, 1917 at the Battle of Vimy Ridge! The family had continued to write to Jay because they were not aware of his death.

The reaction of the students is usually quite somber... they feel a personal connection to Jay and his family. We have a class discussion about the sympathy/empathy they are feeling and how the use of these primary documents helped to bring personal connections to the history being studied. We also discuss continuity and change as it relates to communications during World War One and today. Today, would it take several months for a family to discover their loved one had died in a battle? The different modes of communication are also examined.

Next we go into more depth about the planning and details to prepare Canadian troops for the assault on Vimy Ridge. Students learn about the tactics used by the British and French forces in their more than three year effort to control the ridge. Students then discover the successful combination of tactics such as tunnelling, creeping barrage, combat soldiers access to maps, training in mock up situations. All of these led to the successful attack by the four Canadian Divisions on April 9, 1917.

We then use the giant Vimy Ridge floor - available for booking through Canadian Geographic Education.⁷² We use the lessons that accompany the map and students are better able to visualize the topography due to the contour lines on the map. It shows in detail the location of the trenches. Students work in groups using manipulatives to demonstrate the advancements of each of the Canadian Divisions. Students can better understand the variety of terrain due to the contour lines.



Figure 3. Photo Credit: J. Ruest

⁷² "Geography matters more than ever," *Canadian Geographic Education*, <https://cangeoeducation.ca/en/>.

At this point, the students are familiar with the facts of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, they have experienced a personal connection through primary source letters and they have “physically” been active on a map of Vimy Ridge. The last item I use is a 3-D video where students use their cellphones, earbuds and Google Cardboard to “go to” Vimy Ridge to see the monument and walk the trenches.⁷³

Culminating activities vary but have included groups creating World War One newspapers; writing letters in role as a soldier on the front line on April 12, 1917; posters, essays and poems being created for the Canadian Legion’s Remembrance contest; creating comic strips about the battle either by hand or using an app such as Comic Life; debates about the historical significance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and its role in the development of Canadian identity.

Consolidating the unit with a meaningful culminating activity reinforces all of the material covered in the unit. Using primary sources and actively involving students through the use of giant floor maps and videos helps to create a greater understanding and long-term connection to the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

⁷³ EF Educational Tours Canada, “Vimy Ridge: An EF 360 Experience,” January 12, 2018, video, 5:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VP4eXwXoB4s>.