The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Middle School Pilot Lesson

Overview
In this pilot lesson about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, students learn about the disaster, its background, and the effect of this disaster on history and the history of the labor movement in particular. The lesson is designed in a Whole Group-Small Group-Whole Group model. A Background-Know/-Want-to-Know-Learned (BKWL) chart is used (see page 4). An Inquiry Chart (I-chart) is optional. (See resources at back of lesson). Before the lesson the teacher creates a wall-size version of the chart(s) to post for all students to see/work on.

Note that there are three sample lessons with slightly different materials for each lesson and these can be interchanged if appropriate.

| BKWL Chart |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| **Background**  | **What we Know**| **What we Want to** |
| Our Prior Knowledge . . . [1. Whole group-before the “lesson” begins] | What we learned in the Mini-Lecture . . . [1. Whole group] | Know Questions we have now are . . . [2. Small Groups] |
|                  |                  | **What we Learned** |
|                  |                  | What we have learned from this whole lesson... [3. Whole group] |

Essential question
How can a disaster lead a society to change for the better?

1. WHOLE GROUP

Connect “Great tragedies often reveal much about social conditions and the historical problems confronting people,” (http://www.historians.org/tl/LessonPlans/wi/Huehner/TriangleSWF.html).

- First Students are given 5 minutes to think and “quick-write” about the following questions that are related to the quote, above: What do you think the author of this quote means by this statement? What examples of great tragedies in history have we studied that come to mind? Consider one example. What did the details of this tragedy reveal about life, especially living conditions, at that time?

- Second Pairs of students share examples with each other.

- Third Volunteers are asked to share aloud some of their “quick-write” responses. [These responses are entered into the “B” of the BKWL chart].
**Teach** Mini-Lecture: March 25th, is the anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire—an early 20th century disaster that has shaped history ever since.

The teacher says: “We are going to view a video documentary entitled _________. The video will help us to gather information about the events that led up to the fire and will take us through the factory, which still exists today and is now a part of New York University.

The video shows us photographs (primary documents) that depict the fire, the factory owners and some of the victims of the fire. The video also gives us an idea of what life was like for some workers in New York City in 1911 on the day the fire broke out.”

**Whole-Group Activity** as they view the first 5 minutes of the video [________ name video here], students are jotting down what they notice that they can tell from the video about a) life and working conditions in New York City on March 25, 1911 and, b) what is the evidence that the video offers.

Students then share out what they now know about life in New York City and the events that led to the Shirtwaist Factory fire. [The teacher records their responses in the “Know,” column of the BKWL chart].

The teacher gives a brief summary of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire using the Semantic Map with the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How as the talking points. (See end of packet for Semantic Map.)

**Questions We Now Have**
Students develop questions they have now about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and the teacher records these under the “W” of the BKWL chart or as questions on the I-Chart.

**2. SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITY**
The class is organized into small groups and each group receives copies of a teacher-selected handout, a reading about the Triangle shirtwaist Factory fire.

**Group Member Roles:** include facilitator, recorder, reporter, and reader

**Group Tasks:**
- Members use the questions on the BKWL chart or the on the I-Chart to drive the group’s inquiry concerning the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster.
- Members read the handouts provided, using the inquiry questions to focus their reading.
- After reading, groups discuss the information they have acquired on the disaster, recording any information that answers the questions on the class BKWL chart or the Inquiry chart (I-chart).
Teacher’s Role: After clarifying the group task and facilitating the transition to small groups, the teacher circulates around the room to provide guidance and assess students’ progress, facilitating if necessary.

3. WHOLE-GROUP ACTIVITY
Groups take turns sharing their learning, using the BKWL chart or I-Chart as discussion points.

Time permitting, the class/group views the rest of the video, or may view it at another lesson time.

SUMMARY
Using the “L” column of the BKWL chart, students record their answers to the following question: What did you learn from the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire? The “L” column summarizes what the students have learned from the beginning of this lesson and can be included in the Summary section of the I-chart.

Questions for further consideration: Why, after all these years, do we continue to commemorate the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire? What is the relevance of this event for us today? What does the labor movement do today to protect workers?

Mini-Summary
The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster focused public attention on growing concerns about sweatshops and their exploitation of immigrant workers and other laborers. The Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire ignited the cause of protecting laborers from unfair practices, giving rise to unions and labor laws that protect our most vulnerable citizens from exploitation. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster epitomizes what can happen when industry cares more about profits and money than the welfare of its workers.

Next Steps
Many other lessons can develop from this lesson, which can be taught and learned briefly in one introductory lesson and then serve as the basis of further study over a period of time. This lesson lends itself to an entire unit, perhaps within the context of social studies curriculum unit on industry and the emergence and rise of the labor movement in the 20th century. The questions that emerge from this lesson as recorded on the I-chart can serve both for planning and as initial questions of the next phase of study.