

The Berlin Wall:

A Simulation for the Social Studies Classroom

William B. Russell III

November 9, 2009, marked the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the Berlin Wall. The Wall, a symbol of the Cold War, separated the German people for 28 years (1961–1989), keeping those on the East side isolated. Although the construction and dismantling of the Berlin Wall is a significant part of history, the topic is little covered in the classroom. Textbooks generally include one sentence on the topic. And yet teaching about the Berlin Wall fits well with the pedagogical expectations outlined in the national standards created by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

Of the 10 thematic strands outlined in these standards, both **❶ CULTURE** and **❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE** illustrate the relevancy of the Berlin Wall to the social studies. **❶ CULTURE** outlines the importance of examining cultural patterns and systems in comparison with students' own. **❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE** includes suggestions in which students examine social issues based upon historical knowledge.¹ Many of the other standards also provide a rationale for teaching about the Berlin Wall. Teachers might also check the approved curriculum frameworks of their individual states. Often state standards for social studies are patterned after the national standards, but familiarity with those standards is beneficial.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to (1) provide educators with a classroom-tested simulation for teaching the Berlin Wall and (2) provide educators with a list of relevant resources.

The Berlin Wall Simulation

The Berlin Wall was a 27-mile wall built by the East German government

in 1961 to protect its people from capitalism. The wall split Berlin into East and West Berlin. East Berlin was part of the socialist state of East Germany (the German Democratic Republic), which was created by the Soviet Union. West Berlin was part of West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany), which was a liberal parliamentary republic allied with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

Many students find it hard to relate to historical events that seem irrelevant to their everyday lives. Simulations can actively engage students and help make the content more meaningful.² This simulation of life in Berlin during the Berlin Wall era was tested in a high school classroom and is appropriate for middle and secondary students (but could easily be adapted for the elementary classroom). Teachers should make sure the material and how it is covered is age appropriate. The simulation is not intended to be one lesson plan per se, but an activity that can be incorporated into a lesson plan to help gain students' attention and make the lesson more meaningful. The activity should be carried out during at least two 45-minute class periods (one

period for introduction/painting and one period for discussion/analysis). It should be tailored to fit the needs of individual classrooms. Teachers should also refer to their respective state standards, to discern how the content covered fits within those standards.

Procedures

1. Introduction—As students enter the classroom, direct each student to a specific desk (separate friends and groups from one another). Once students are seated, divide the class into two sections (East and West). To divide the class into two sections, teachers can stack cardboard boxes. Teachers can also hang sheets from the ceiling or use vertical filing cabinets wrapped in art paper. (Paint the cardboard boxes grey, if you can, to look like the Berlin Wall.) Cardboard boxes can be obtained from most local appliance stores for free. It is important not to build the wall completely across the classroom. Leave space so you can stand in front of the class and see both sections of the classroom. This will help prevent classroom management issues.
2. Explain to students that the classroom rules have changed. The new rules allow the west section of the classroom more freedom (e.g., bathroom breaks, less or no homework, the right to eat in class, wear hats, etc...). The new rules for the east section are more



Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, December 1, 1989. The structure was already freely accessible from the East, but the crossing to the West would not officially open until December 22nd.

(Department of Defense Photo, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

rigid and limit the students' freedom (e.g., no hall passes, no talking, more homework, etc...). The rule changes that are enforced need to be relevant to your students' everyday lives. For example, wearing hats and other headwear is a big deal for students, so it was included as a freedom for the west section. This helps make the simulation more relevant and meaningful. (Of course, it would be inappropriate to limit this in classrooms where students wear headwear for religious reasons.) Explain why these rules are being implemented and why this wall was built. Tell the students in the East, that the wall is for the best and it will help prevent them from being negatively influenced by the students in the West. Let the students react appropriately. Give them an opportunity to voice their opinions. If possible, have an administrator come in and speak to both sections, condoning the wall

and new rule changes. This will add sincerity.

3. Spend the class period discussing the rules and student reactions. Students will complain about unfairness. Continue to listen to reactions from both sides.
4. Encourage students to voice their frustration with the new wall and the new rules by painting the wall. Provide students with paint, markers, and other drawing utensils. Including artwork and related activities into the curriculum can provide visual stimulation, increase learning, and increase student achievement.³ Students might want to draw pictures or write statements (quotes, sayings etc.) as a way of expressing their personal opinions. This allows students to release their feelings and is very similar to what occurred on the actual Berlin Wall.

For example, during our activity, a student on the east side of the classroom wall painted an image of what he thought it would be like on the west side of the classroom wall. The image included an idealistic picture of students having the freedom to wear and do as they please. Another student, on the west side of the classroom, painted a picture depicting a broken heart, since her boyfriend was on the other side of the classroom wall. Other students painted images or scribbled poems or sayings pertaining to their feelings about the classroom wall.

5. Once the wall is painted, hold a class discussion about the wall artwork. Encourage students to analyze the art. Have students examine each side of the wall. Ask these questions to spur discussion, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation:

- *What do you see?*
- *Who do you think created this piece?*
- *Why do you think he or she created this piece?*
- *What feelings does this piece evoke?*
- *What can you conclude from the piece?*

As discussion of the artwork progresses, tie the class's situation to that of Berlin during the era of the Berlin Wall. Depending on the time allotted for this simulation, teachers can provide more or less detail as needed.

Resources

The following resources range from the primary level to the secondary level. Due to the enormous amount of resources available, each category has been limited to three resources. The resources can help educators develop effective lesson plans to engage students

in meaningful learning.

Websites:

- The Newseum: The Berlin Wall (www.newseum.org/berlinwall) – An interactive online museum that provides rich detail about the Berlin Wall, from its conception to its fall.
- Berlin Wall Online (www.dailysoft.com/berlinwall/) – This site includes a detailed timeline, pictures, and the history of the Berlin Wall. It also includes links to other useful Berlin Wall websites.
- Berlin Wall Art (www.berlinwallart.com/) – This site includes an amazing gallery of Wall artwork.

Films:

- *Fall of the Berlin Wall* (1990) Director Peter Claus Schmidt – Examines the Berlin Wall's erection, history, and fall. Schmidt, P.C. (Director) USA: Warner Home Video.
- *The Wall: Live in Berlin* (1996) Director Roger Waters – An account of the charity concert by Pink Floyd's Roger Waters and various other musicians to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. USA: Polygram Video.
- *The Burning Wall: Dissent and Opposition behind the Berlin Wall* (2004) Directed by Hava Kohav Beller – An award-winning documentary that depicts resistance to the Berlin Wall from the beginning to the end. USA: Direct Cinema Limited.

Books:

- *The Wall Jumper: A Berlin Story* by Peter Schneider (1998) – A fictional tale about a man who lives in the divided city of Berlin and the events in his life as he crosses back-and-forth over the Berlin Wall (Chicago,

Ill.: University of Chicago Press).

- *The Fall of the Berlin Wall* by William Buckley – Describes not only the fall of Berlin Wall, but also its construction, and its place in the Cold War (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2004).
- *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided, 1961-1989* by Fredrick Taylor – Provides an overview of the Wall and its history, supported by research (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 2007).

Note: Teachers should pre-view or pre-read any of the resources before implementing them into the curriculum, and ascertain whether the relevant resource is suitable for the intended audience. Teachers should also check with the principal and/or county/state regulations before teaching content or using resources that could put their positions at risk.

Conclusion

Social studies teachers are consistently trying to engage students in the content. Students sometimes complain that content is boring and not relevant to their everyday lives. Simulations stimulate interest, and as a result, students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the content. The Berlin Wall simulation will actively engage students and promote interest. 📖

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (1994), www.ncss.org.
2. William B. Russell III and Jeff Byford, "The Evolution of Man and His Tools: A Simulation from the MACOS Project," *The Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 10, no. 3 (2006): 17-21.
3. Russell, "Teaching the Holocaust with Online Art: A Case Study of High School Students," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 31, no. 2 (2007): 35-42; Julie Romero, *Integrating Visual Arts into Social Studies*, ERIC Reproduction No/ED405268 (California, 1996).

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