

PIKE RIVER EDUCATION RESOURCE

HISTORY+ SOCIAL STUDIES

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES | YEARS 10–13

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“AT THE HEART OF PIKE RIVER IS A REMINDER THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN TAKE A STAND AND BE HEARD. SONYA AND ANNA’S DETERMINATION TO CHALLENGE AUTHORITY SHOWS HOW CIVIC ACTION SHAPES OUR HISTORY, AND WHY WE SHOULD NEVER BE AFRAID TO QUESTION THOSE IN POWER.”

ROBERT SARKIES | DIRECTOR

TIMELINE OF NARRATIVES

OBJECTIVE

Understand shifting public memory and accountability.

Bring in media coverage for comparison, alongside the film's dramatised portrayal of similar moments.

DESCRIPTION

Students build a class timeline (2010–present) that traces key events connected to Pike River, such as —

- The 2010 explosion
- The Royal Commission of Inquiry
- Ongoing advocacy milestones led by families
- The development of the Pike29 Memorial Track
- Political and legal outcomes over the years

Annotate each event with how different groups framed the story, for example —

- Corporate voices (e.g., company statements)
- Government officials (e.g., inquiries, political responses)
- Whānau and activist groups (e.g., vigils, protests, demands for accountability)

Discuss how narrative framing has shifted — from initial tragedy, to demands for justice, to long-term memory and commemoration.

TASK

Write a short analytical piece responding to the question — How did the dominant narrative around Pike River change over time, and what influenced those shifts?

OUTCOME

Students will —

Practise historical interpretation and critical analysis of how stories evolve.

Develop awareness of how media and institutions shape public memory.

Engage with the idea of civic responsibility and collective remembrance.



DEBATE — WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

OBJECTIVE

Explore accountability, justice, and ethical responsibility.

DESCRIPTION

Students take on assigned roles such as —

- Mining company executive
- Government minister
- Union representative
- Family member of a miner
- Journalist

Draw evidence from —

The Royal Commission of Inquiry findings

Contemporary news reports and public statements

Key scenes in the film (e.g., Anna and Sonya at the fence, Peter Whittall's trial)

Debate questions such as —

Who should carry the most responsibility for the Pike River tragedy?

How do we weigh corporate accountability against systemic failures?

What role does media play in shaping perceptions of responsibility?

Encourage students to consider multiple perspectives — the lived experiences of miners, the grief of families, government oversight, and corporate decision-making.

TASKS

- Conduct a structured debate in class where students present and challenge perspectives.
- Following the debate, each student submits a position paper (700–800 words) clearly articulating their argument and evidence.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Strengthen their argumentation and public speaking skills.

Practise ethical reasoning, weighing justice, accountability, and empathy.

Develop a deeper understanding of how history, media, and art frame responsibility.



COMPARATIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

OBJECTIVE

Situate Pike River within Aotearoa New Zealand's broader history of social justice movements and explore how these movements and their leaders shape cultural identity.

DESCRIPTION

Highlight how leaders and key moments within these movements serve as symbols of cultural identity, reflecting and shaping the nation's values and moral compass.

Compare Pike River activism with other significant movements, such as —

- **Bastion Point (1977–78)** — Māori land occupation and resistance to state development, led by Joe Hawke and Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei.
- **Anti-nuclear movement (1970s–80s)** — grassroots mobilisation that shaped national policy, with voices including David Lange, Elaine Shaw, and Maire Leadbeater.
- **Ihumātao (2016–2020)** — protection of whenua and cultural heritage.

Analyse —

- **Narrative framing** — How were these movements presented to the public? Consider how leaders became central figures in shaping public perception and collective memory, including through news coverage, documentaries, and other media.

- **Advocacy strategies** — Examine how movements used protest, legal action, storytelling, and international pressure, and compare these strategies with those of Pike River activists.

- **Outcomes** — What was achieved, and how did public memory evolve? Reflect on how these struggles contributed to Aotearoa's cultural identity.

Discuss what makes activism effective, ethical, and sustainable, and how stories of resistance are passed down and integrated into national consciousness.

TASK

Students prepare a comparative slideshow or mini-essay highlighting parallels and contrasts between Pike River and one other movement.

They should reflect on storytelling as activism — how narrating injustice can fuel collective change and contribute to shaping cultural identity.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Gain insight into civic engagement across different eras.

Critically examine the power of collective action and storytelling.

Begin to see Pike River as part of a broader conversation about justice, memory, social change, and national identity in Aotearoa New Zealand.

ROYAL COMMISSION CASE STUDY

OBJECTIVE

Analyse systemic failure, accountability, and pathways to reform.

DESCRIPTION

Use excerpts from the Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy as a foundation for close study.

Guide students to examine —

- **Governance** — the role of government oversight and regulation.
- **Mine safety** — technical failures, ignored warnings, and risk management.
- **Advocacy outcomes** — how families and campaigners pushed for accountability and reforms.

Encourage students to consider how commissions function: they don't just look backwards at what went wrong, they also look forward, making recommendations to prevent future tragedies.

Key discussion points —

- What systemic failures allowed the disaster to occur?
- What reforms were proposed, and have they been acted upon?

- How does a Royal Commission balance technical evidence with human testimony and grief?
- What parallels exist with other inquiries in Aotearoa (e.g. Christchurch earthquakes, Royal Commission into Abuse in Care)?

TASK

Students form mini-commissions in small groups.

Each group presents findings on one aspect (e.g. government regulation, company culture, worker safety, family advocacy).

Groups develop and deliver a 'commission report' with findings, recommendations, and reflections on lessons learned.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Build analytical and evaluative skills.

Practise civic responsibility, understanding how inquiries shape public accountability.

Connect historical analysis with practical applications for the future, seeing how evidence and testimony drive systemic reform.

COMMUNITY MEMORY MAPPING

OBJECTIVE

Explore how societies remember tragedy through memorials, anniversaries, and collective rituals.

DESCRIPTION

Guide students in creating a memory map of how Pike River has been remembered locally and nationally.

Elements to include —

- **Physical memorials** — the Pike²⁹ Memorial Track, monuments, plaques, and the mine site itself.
- **Anniversaries** — how annual commemorations keep the story alive in public consciousness.
- **Community rituals** — vigils, protests, and family-led remembrance ceremonies.
- **Media representation** — coverage of anniversaries, public statements by families, and cultural works inspired by Pike River.

Encourage comparisons with other collective remembrances in Aotearoa —

- **ANZAC Day** — national commemoration of sacrifice and resilience.
- **Christchurch earthquakes** — anniversaries, memorial services, and permanent landmarks.
- **Other disasters (e.g. Erebus)** — where public remembrance shaped collective identity.

Key discussion questions —

- What purpose do public rituals of remembrance serve?
- Who decides how an event is remembered, and whose voices are amplified or silenced?
- What role does art, film, and performance play in keeping memory alive?

TASK

Students design a visual or written ‘memory map’ tracing the ways Pike River has been remembered across time.

The map should include both physical spaces (memorials, tracks, monuments) and intangible acts of remembrance (vigils, news cycles, cultural portrayals).

Students present their maps alongside a short analysis that reflects on the civic, cultural, and social role of collective memory.

OUTCOME

Students will —

Gain a deeper appreciation of how societies construct collective memory.

Learn to critically evaluate the role of remembrance in shaping public values, resilience, and accountability.

Connect history, civic culture, and personal reflection, recognising remembrance as both a private act of grief and a public act of responsibility.