

## Using Constructivist Methods in Drug Education

Students need knowledge and skills to navigate a complex world where psychoactive drugs—coffee, alcohol, cannabis and so on—are commonly used and both praised and vilified by adults. That’s why the best drug education programs involve

- making sense of humanity’s relationships with drugs,
- examining personal choices and social interactions, and
- understanding risk and learning ways to manage it.

Using constructivist methods to deliver drug education is ideal because it avoids setting the teacher up as the “drug expert” who provides content. Instead, the role of the teacher is to create a context of inquiry. Students are encouraged to examine, elaborate on and question their own ideas and experiences as well as those of others, guided by available evidence and the conventions of classroom discourse.

### Lean on Literature

One way to put constructivist methods into practice is through the use of thoughtful literature. For example, in *Lunch with Lenin and Other Stories*, award-winning author Deborah Ellis offers 10 harrowing, inspiring and often surprising stories that explore the lives of teens affected by drugs in settings as diverse as northern Canada, small town America and rural Afghanistan.

Here are some ways to use the stories to “teach” drug education in your classroom:

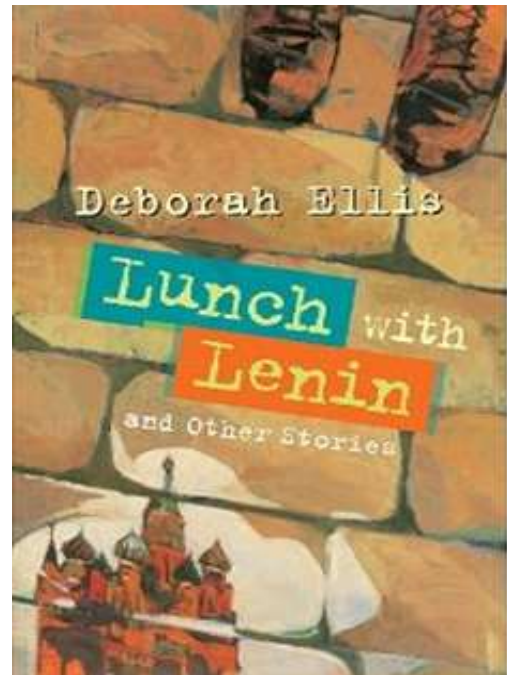
#### What Happens Next?

Choose a story. Identify a few “stop points” in the story that would lend themselves well to a read-stop-imagine exercise and discussion with your class. (Tip: The story called Lunch with Lenin has built-in stop points that make it easy to know when to make predictions and discuss issues and ideas.)

#### What’s the Relationship?

Ask students to choose a story to read. Ask them to identify and record the ways in which they empathize or sympathize with the main character’s dilemma and circumstances and the ways in which their lives differ. You might have them use a Venn diagram to record their observations.

Or pick a story set in a country your class is interested in or is currently studying (e.g., Russia, Afghanistan, Canada). Ask students to read it (or read it aloud to the class) and discuss how the experience of drugs in the story may be culturally or historically significant.



## Similarities and Differences

Pick two or three stories united by substance, region or theme. For example, *The Dark Side of Nixon*, *Prodigal*, and *Another Night in Disneyland* all involve alcohol use and are set in North America. *Pretty Flowers*, *Dancing with Beads* and *The Cactus People* all have at their core poverty and the shadows of imperialism.

- Ask students to read all three stories and compare and contrast them in interesting ways (e.g., individual factors, social factors and environmental factors). A Venn diagram might be one way for students to report their observations.
- Or break the class into groups, assign each group one story, and have them read and discuss the story in terms of the various factors that influenced the drug use represented in the story. Then have students form new groups in which members have read a different story, and ask them to share summaries and record similarities and differences in the main character's personality, social circumstances and environment. As a class, reflect on how different circumstances may affect the impact of drug use.

## Draw on History

The earth is full of plants and other substances with psychoactive properties. And for thousands of years human societies have been experimenting with these substances, exploring their beneficial qualities and learning about their dangers. History – whether ancient civilizations, medieval Europe, the peoples of the new world, the explorers and the colonial period or modern history – provides rich examples of human interactions with drugs. Exploring and discussing the complex relationships involved and how they relate to our experiences today offers a wealth of interesting material for young minds to use in constructing the knowledge and skills needed to deal with drugs in our modern world.

## What if a Conversation Gets Awkward?

Since all questions and comments can be heard, discussed and explored in light of evidence, even students who go for shock value will soon learn that their ideas are simply that—ideas. By validating all students' inquiries and guiding them to sources of information, facilitators encourage young people to become active thinking beings.

It is important to help students learn to critically evaluate evidence and avoid simply providing acceptable sources of evidence. The social community of the classroom provides a rich source of ideas. Helping students express their ideas and weigh them in light of other students' ideas is a great way to put the constructivist approach into practice.

## Possible resources

Ellis, D. (2008). *Lunch with Lenin and Other Stories*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

McGovern, P.E. (2009). *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer and other Alcoholic Beverages*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Reist, D., Bodner, N. and Capler, R. (2011). [\*Ancient Peoples & Psychoactive Plants\*](#). Vancouver, BC: Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Reist, D., Bodner, N. and Capler, R. (2011). [\*iMinds: A Health Literacy Resource – Grade 7\*](#). Vancouver, BC: Centre for Addictions Research of BC.

Robbin, T. (2009). *B is for Beer: A Children's Book for Grown-ups/A Grown-up Book for Children*. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins.