



Opioid Use: Deconstructing Media Messages

To explore the topic of opioid use and the media, we suggest using two recent news reports about fentanyl overdoses in BC. Both reports follow first responders in situations where one or more people have overdosed on fentanyl. However, the differences between the two are interesting and may reflect different attitudes and beliefs about drug use, and the people who use opioids in particular.

The goal of this instructional outline is to increase awareness about the elements of a media story and their potential to influence our thoughts and behaviour and to develop critical skills in deconstructing the media messages about drug use.

Instructional strategies

1. Ask students to read the [CBC news report](#) and [National Post report](#) about fentanyl overdoses in Vancouver and facilitate a discussion about how the language and images of these pieces of media impact the messages that reach the reader. You might use questions such as those below:
 - a. Compare and contrast the opening sentences of the two articles. What emotional response is encouraged by each? How does that play out in the rest of each article?
 - b. How are the people who use drugs described in each article? Think about the language used to talk about them (names, descriptors, labels, expressions) as well as the images used. Are they similar or different? How? Are the portrayals linked to the way the articles are introduced?
 - c. What impact do labels have on people (the people who are labelled, the people around them, the people who use the labels)? Have you ever been labelled? How did it make you feel? Why?
 - d. Compare and contrast these two reflections:

Vancouver firefighter: "You just walk by lines of different people shooting up and then you treat the third one on the left, and it's just a matter of time before the first two go down as well."

Delta police officer: "Once we were in our rhythm, I started to think, 'Who else?' ... 'How many more?'"

How are they similar? How are they different? What messages does each send?
 - e. What do you think accounts for the differences between these two reports of opioid overdoses?
 - f. How might each report influence readers to think about
 - drugs?
 - the people who use drugs?
 - the solutions to the current overdose problem?

2. Invite students to form small collaborative teams and challenge them to write a fictional report about a recent spike in the number of opioid-related deaths in their community.

After they have finished writing the report, have each team read their report to the class and facilitate a class discussion after each presentation with questions like:

- a. How are drug users portrayed in your report? What language or images did you use to talk about them?
- b. What message(s) does your report send about drug use? What about the people who use opioids?
- c. How is the report you wrote different from the National Post report you read earlier? How is it similar? How does it compare to the CBC report?
- d. Was it easy or difficult, as a group, to agree on the language you would use or the messages you would portray in your report? Explain.
- e. What, if anything, does your report indicate about you? Do you think it is possible for someone to write a report that indicates nothing about the author? Explain.
- f. Do you think that people who write news reports have a responsibility to be fair with respect to the people and issues they write about? Is fairness, in this context, the same as being unbiased? Why or why not?

Drug literacy

Big idea

- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives

Competencies

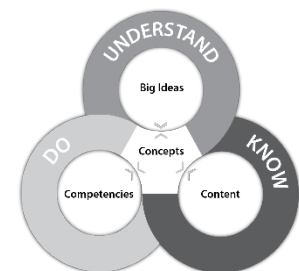
- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)





English Language Arts 11 – New Media

Big ideas

- Texts are socially, culturally, geographically, and historically constructed
- Language shapes ideas and influences others.

Competencies

- Comprehend and connect (reading, listening, viewing)
 - Access information for diverse purposes and from a variety of sources and evaluate its relevance, accuracy, and reliability
 - Apply appropriate strategies in a variety of contexts to comprehend written, oral, visual, and multimodal texts; guide inquiry; and extend thinking
 - Recognize and appreciate how various forms, structures, and features of texts reflect a variety of purposes, audiences, and messages
 - Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
 - Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts, including gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic factors
 - Recognize how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identities
 - Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- Create and communicate (writing, speaking, representing)
 - Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understanding and extend thinking
 - Reflect on, assess, and refine texts to improve their clarity, effectiveness, and impact according to purpose, audience, and message
 - Transform ideas and information to create original texts, using new or unfamiliar genres, forms, structures, and styles