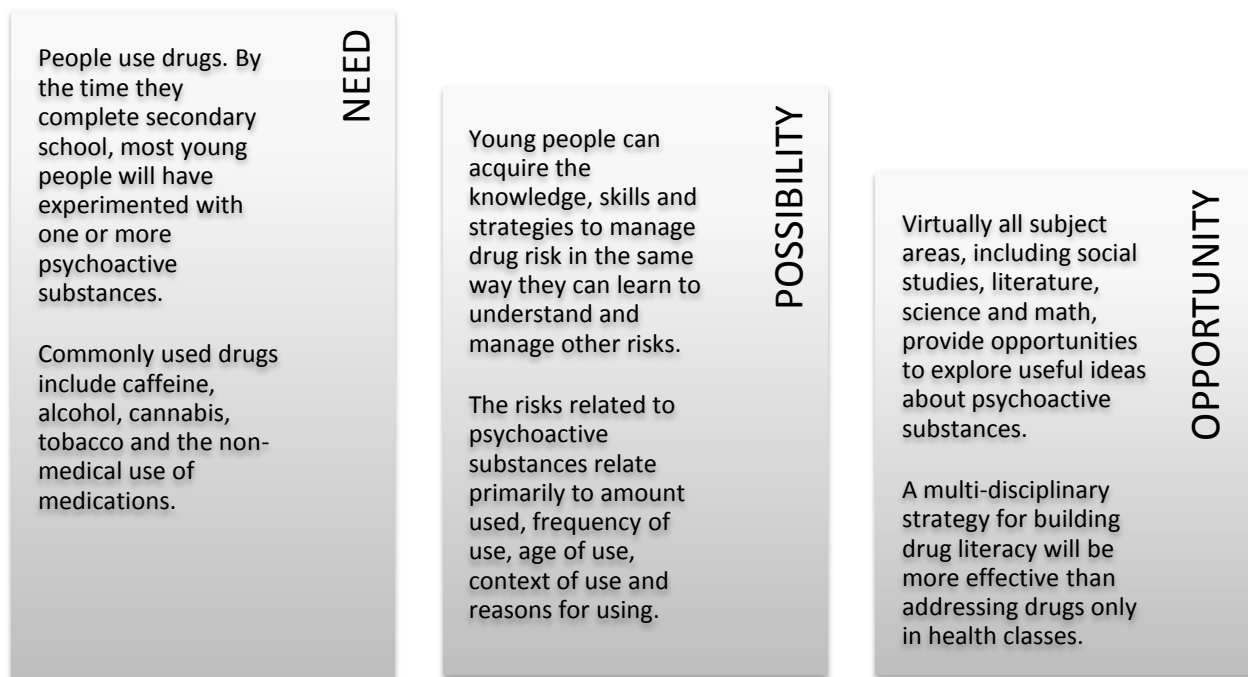


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## Teacher Tips: Drug Literacy and Constructivist Methods

Drug literacy can be defined as a body of knowledge, skills and strategies related to the use of psychoactive substances or drugs that must be constructed by the learners out of experiences and interactions within their social contexts. Like other forms of literacy, drug literacy is critical to the learner's ability to survive and thrive in our society.

But unlike many other topics, discussions about drugs are bound to invoke controversy. Some teachers may view the potential for controversy as unattractive or overwhelming. They may worry about not being drug experts and being asked questions for which they do not have answers. As a result, they may avoid engaging in real learning activities related to alcohol or other drugs. But this would be a mistake. There are important reasons to engage in quality drug education.



Drug literacy involves much more than teaching young people about the dangers of drug use and marketing a particular lifestyle to them. Drug education needs to provide students with opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and strategies that will allow them to navigate a world in which psychoactive substances are commonly used and both praised and vilified by the adults around them.

Drug literacy involves:

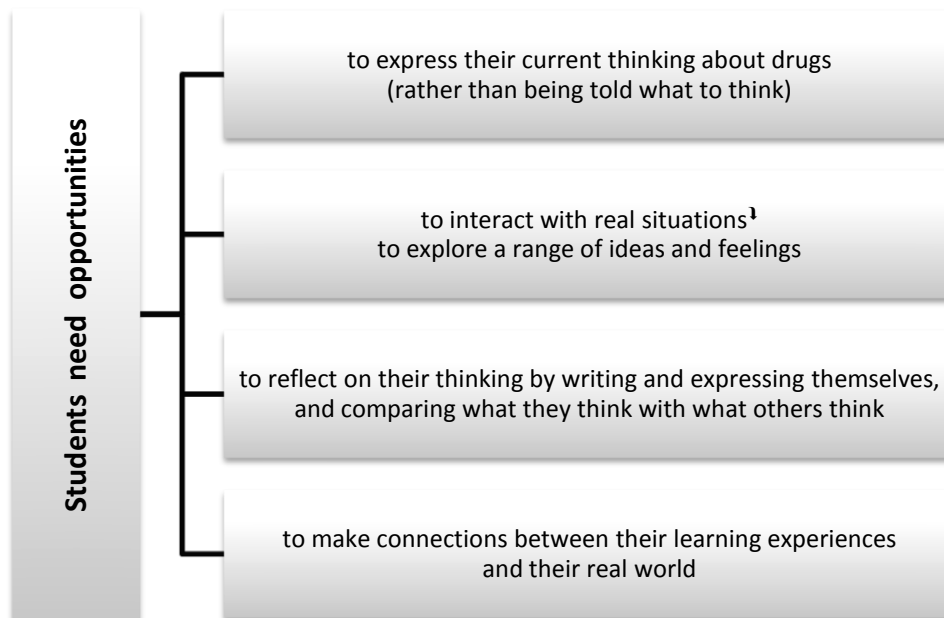
- Learning to make sense of humanity's relationships with psychoactive substances
- Learning about risk and developing skills to manage risk (including not using a drug)
- Learning to manage personal choices and social interactions in ways that promote the health and wellness of everyone

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A constructivist educational approach is ideal for teaching drug literacy because it avoids setting the teacher up as the “drug expert.” The teacher is not expected to provide content. Instead, students are encouraged to examine and elaborate upon their own ideas and experiences guided by the available evidence and the conventions of classroom discourse.

The role of a teacher is to create a context of inquiry. 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 that the teacher 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 start the constructivist process.

*iMinds*, available at [www.iminds.ca](http://www.iminds.ca), provides basic constructivist learning resources for Grades 4-10.



<sup>1</sup> Literature, like the stories by Deborah Ellis in *Lunch with Lenin*, provide great opportunities for students to “experience” drugs in different contexts and to explore their ideas and feelings.

*Written by Dan Reist*