An Arts-Based Antidiscriminatory Approach to Online Nursing Education: Reducing Addiction Stigma and Meeting Social Justice Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Background. Addiction stigma exists in health care systems among health care providers, including nursing students. It is often tied to knowledge deficits and acts as a barrier to those seeking supportive addiction services.

Purpose. To discuss innovative approaches that reduce addiction stigma and meet social justice learning outcomes in online nursing education.

Methods. A four-stage algorithm was used with 95 articles. Applying an exclusion and screening process yielded 17 articles. Another 10 articles were drawn from my recent graduate work.

Results. Online educators can use artistic pedagogical technologies to practice from a critical consciousness lens to design social justice learning outcomes with an antidiscriminatory framework.

Conclusion. An intentional and innovative framework to reduce addiction stigma in online nursing students is proposed, developed from artistic pedagogical technologies within a critical consciousness lens. This inclusive pedagogical approach is accessible to diverse twenty-first century learners, reduces addictions stigma, and leads to better-prepared nurses who deliver excellent nursing care for all.

Keywords: social justice, online education, arts-based, addiction nursing, stigma

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An Arts-Based Antidiscriminatory Approach to Online Nursing Education: Reducing Addiction Stigma and Meeting Social Justice Learning Outcomes

One in 10 Canadians struggles with addiction and 83% of these individuals have experienced barriers to recovery (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2017). The Canadian public health system has been increasingly impacted by addiction stigma, which has caused negative health outcomes to individuals and populations (Government of Canada, 2020a). Miller (2019) defines stigma as “a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of individuals have about a particular circumstance, quality or person” (para. 1). Stigma can be expressed through behaviours that judge, label, or exclude groups based on negative attitudes and stereotyping (Government of Canada, 2018). Addiction stigma has acted as a barrier to the health and wellbeing of those struggling with addiction (Government of Canada, 2020a).

Addiction stigma among health professionals places individuals struggling with substance use in a more vulnerable position (Volkow, 2020), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social justice strives to eliminate discrimination and inequities, and should therefore be at the core of nursing programs (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). Therefore, educators must hone innovative strategies to bridge the gap between nursing ethics and practice. Moreover, many nursing graduates will be placed in a position of influence over those who struggle with addiction.

People, including nursing students, develop addiction stigma for various reasons, but it is often caused by a deficiency in knowledge on the matter (Knaak et al., 2019). It is therefore vital to address stigma (Cloyd et al., 2021) and educate students about addiction prior to entering the workforce.

This paper summarizes evidence from credible scholarly literature related to addiction stigma, social justice concepts, inclusive pedagogies, nursing education, and arts-based learning.
strategies in order to discuss innovative approaches that can reduce addiction stigma and meet social justice learning outcomes in online nursing education. Artistic pedagogical technologies (APTs) are creative aesthetic strategies that are beneficial for online postsecondary students and instructors (Janzen et al., 2017) and are discussed as they relate to innovative teaching methods for social justice learning outcomes. Narrative photography—a type of APT in which students self-reflect and tell a story using images, videos, and various forms of art (Leyva-Moral et al., 2021)—is asserted to be an inclusive and effective approach to reduce addiction stigma among and meet social justice learning outcomes for online nursing students.

**Theoretical Framework**

Nursing education and practice are limited in their understanding of how to demonstrate social justice (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). It is becoming increasingly clear; however, that nursing must seek ways to teach and practice the constructs of antidiscrimination and equity. I therefore use Blanchet Garneau et al.’s (2018) critical antidiscriminatory pedagogy (CADP) as a theoretical backdrop for this discussion. The CADP is built on antiracist and antidiscrimination approaches (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). Moreover, the CADP “pushes beyond culturally sensitive, tolerant, and respectful attitudes promoted by multiculturalist approaches toward a critical cultural perspective” (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018, p. 3). It promotes transformational learning, which allows for “a transformation of the learners’ frame of reference, which means that learners experience a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of their thought, feelings, and actions” (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018, p. 4). The CADP encourages educators to be critically conscious and reflective of the pedagogical methods they employ to limit social inequalities within the classroom and focus on promoting awareness of the power and knowledge dynamic (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). Practicing from a critical conscious perspective,
educators should discuss health equity, population statistics, assumptions or stereotypes, and how these impact nursing practice and patient outcomes (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018).

Methods

This scoping review was completed as a curated master’s degree project within the Athabasca University (AU) Master of Nursing program. References from previous graduate work and the AU Discovery Library Database make up the foundation of this literature search. Keywords used in the AU Discovery Database were:

(art*-based or art* based or art*) and (online or distance or education or learn* or teach* or pedag*) and (addict* or substance*) and (stigma or bias or social justice or discr*) and (nurs* or med* or health*)

The search was restricted to peer-reviewed articles published in or after 2015 with English and full-text availability. The search strategy yielded 95 articles. A review of title relevance eliminated 27 articles. The abstracts of the remaining 68 articles were reviewed, and a further 31 articles were eliminated. The remaining 37 were read for their relevance, and 17 were selected as references in addition to 10 articles previously used in my graduate work.

Prevalence of Addiction Stigma and a Call for Action

Prevalence of Addiction and Addiction Stigma

About one in five Canadians older than 15 years will struggle with addiction at least once in their lifetime (Government of Canada, 2018). Addiction is strongly associated with an individual’s social determinants of health, discrimination, and historical trauma (Government of Canada, 2018). Individuals who have experienced abuse, trauma, exposure, inability to manage stress, and adverse childhood experiences have an increased probability of experiencing problematic substance use (Government of Canada, 2018).
Addiction stigma is a Canadian public health problem (Government of Canada, 2020c). Canada has tried to address addiction stigma within health care through equity-oriented interventions, trauma-related stress and burnout initiatives, education initiatives, and policy changes (Government of Canada, 2020b). Unfortunately, addiction stigma is still evident within the Canadian health care system (Government of Canada, 2020b). Addiction stigma may be tied to knowledge deficits around or misconceptions of addiction (Miller, 2019).

Addiction stigma exists within the nursing and general health care population (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020). Volkow (2020) asserts that many health care providers view addiction “as a result of moral weakness and flawed character” (para. 2). A Canadian phenomenological study involving interviews with 23 participants from a Toronto community health centre (including senior staff, peer workers, and front-line health workers) found multiple forms of stigma and discrimination towards substance use issues (Murney et al., 2020). Murney et al. (2020) explain that substance users are “popularly believed to be choosing an unhealthy, dangerous lifestyle as part of an irresponsible but nonetheless conscious decision-making process” (p. 5).

Nursing education faces a challenge: preparing nursing graduates who can provide excellence in nursing care to those struggling with addictions (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020). Addiction stigma is prevalent in nursing student communities as they are made up of diverse learners who bring their own set of beliefs, attitudes, and biases. For instance, after surveying 88 nursing students attending a southwestern US University, Cloyd et al. (2021) found that the social status of substance users influenced the amount of stigma nursing students felt towards them. At the same time, the perception of substance use led most nursing students to assume that the patient also had a low social status (Cloyd et al., 2021).
Nursing curricula lack sufficient experiences and knowledge related to caring for patients with addictions (Farrell, 2020). Moreover, nursing educators often lack addiction nursing experience, limiting their capacity to strengthen related curricula (Farrell, 2020). It is clear that nursing instructors must intentionally address nursing student addiction stigma, but this gap in pedagogical capacity presents a health care crisis and requires nursing educational leaders to collaborate with external stakeholders (Farrell, 2020).

**The Impact of Addiction Stigma and a Call for Action**

Addiction stigma has a profound negative effect at a variety of levels. Stigma leads to discrimination and fails to uphold fundamental human rights (Government of Canada, 2018). Addiction stigma can distort one’s perception of others (Knaak et al., 2019). Stigma creates disadvantages and inequitable social outcomes (Government of Canada, 2020a). Inequities are widened among groups who have experienced addiction stigma and marginalization, thus limiting the accessibility of housing, income, social support, and health care (Government of Canada, 2020a).

The Canadian public health system has been increasingly impacted by addiction stigma, which is a barrier to the health and wellbeing of those struggling with substance use (Government of Canada, 2020a). Those who experience addiction stigma are less likely to seek or obtain the health care services they require (Volkow, 2020). Knakk et al. (2019) conducted a focus group study in which the participants were individuals who had experienced addiction stigma. One participant shared their experience by stating, “addiction is one of the only health-care problems where you’re more likely to be thrown out of a hospital for showing symptoms of your illness than you are to receive care” (p. 5). Discrimination and stigma within nursing practice negatively affect patient and population health outcomes (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018).
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and have had an impact on deaths attributed to untreated drug and alcohol use (Volkow, 2020). When the nursing profession demonstrates discriminatory behaviours and stigma, it acts as a barrier for those struggling with substance use to access health care resources that seek to reduce morbidity and mortality rates amongst these patients (Volkow, 2020).

Nurses are required to demonstrate ethical practice that refrains from stigmatizing behaviours, such as labelling or judging, toward persons receiving care (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017). Moreover, “nurses foster a moral community in which ethical values and challenges can be openly discussed and supported” (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017, p. 13). Education has already played a vital role in reducing addiction stigma among nursing students yet nursing graduates are not prepared to handle patients influenced by the opioid crisis (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020). Nursing education must focus on increasing student capacity to uphold social justice principles within their practice (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018) and must develop innovative ways to address addiction stigma among nursing students.

Blanchet Garneau et al.’s (2018) CADP emphasizes the importance of social justice in the nursing curriculum with a critical intersectional perspective that promotes transformative learning with praxis-oriented critical consciousness. Through praxis-oriented critical consciousness, transformational learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, fostering insights into our practice environments and our ability to change them (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). Furthermore, educators must seek pedagogical approaches that reflect positive core values related to diversity, inclusion, and cultural responses (National League for Nursing, 2016).

Blanchet Garneau et al. (2018) suggest that collective learning activities offer a fitting opportunity to develop transformational learning experiences that foster a praxis-oriented critical consciousness among learners. The link between social-emotional learning and intercultural
education requires educators to acknowledge the role of emotions in learning (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Intercultural education initiatives promote empathy toward and emotional understanding of others (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Intercultural education encourages critical thinking by having nursing students participate in uncomfortable learning activities that discuss fundamental societal issues and inequalities (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Overall, “the idea is that students are encouraged to develop the ability to reflect upon their own experiences and emotions when they think and act in relation to cultural diversity” (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018, p. 614).

**APTs as an Intentional Strategy within Online Nursing Education**

The National League for Nursing (2016) emphasizes that diversity and excellence in nursing are synergistic and undividable. The digital age has expanded the role of nurses. It has provided nurse educators with a geographically and culturally diverse set of learners who learn about caring within a unique social environment (Sitzman, 2017). Art offers multiliteracies, or broad modes of representation; this allows for the engagement of a diverse set of learners (Pauly et al., 2019). Therefore, using APTs in online nursing environments demonstrates synergistic learning while acknowledging each student’s uniqueness and diversity.

Nursing education is limited in its understanding of how to demonstrate social justice (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). An arts-based learning approach may be one way of solving this problem. Using art as a pedagogical strategy reflects a culturally responsive learning approach (Pauly et al., 2019; Reif & Grant, 2010). Using art within classrooms allows for inclusion as it provides an opportunity to recognize that each person has a unique perspective and is empowered to express themselves through the artistic medium (Favella, 2017). Moreover, using art as a culturally sustaining pedagogy promotes “inclusive ways of knowing and
communicating” (Pauly et al., 2019, p. 205). This recognition of individual differences promotes diversity.

APTs offer innovative collective learning strategies in online nursing education, which can be utilized for social justice learning outcomes. APTs offer a low-cost addition to online education platforms that seek to meet the needs of students and educators within this fast-paced digital age (Janzen et al., 2017). Additionally, APTs promote creativity, interaction, and community building within online postsecondary classrooms (Janzen et al., 2017). Janzen et al. (2017) conducted a study in which they asked 15 graduate students to share their experiences using APTs. The results showed that the majority of participants felt that APTs positively influenced their learning. Of these participants, 92% reported feeling comfortable interacting with other classmates in the online classroom when participating in APTs. APTs empower learners, thereby allowing them to control their learning and choices on how to participate (Janzen et al., 2017). Furthermore, Janzen et al. (2017) found that with APTs, “diversity becomes evident and valued by the class community” (p. 13).

Arts-Based Learning as an Effective Strategy to Decrease Addiction Stigma in Online Nursing Students

Using Art to Reduce Existing Prejudices

Art invites participants to stop and reflect, which can yield valuable insights and transformational learning. Creating and reflecting on art initiates deep reflection and critical thinking (Formato, 2020). Paivinen and Bade (2008) used Voice—a collection of art created by women who have a history of addiction—as a teaching and learning tool. The author’s found that Voice offered a valuable method of challenging stigma and exploring the experiences of individuals who have been historically silenced—specifically, in this case, women who have
suffered from addiction. Overall, Voice showed a unique, in-depth understanding of the experience of addiction (Paivinen & Bade, 2008).

Similarly, Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al. (2020) studied first-year nursing students’ perceptions of individuals struggling with addiction. They used a pre-test/post-test design that involved an interactive presentation following a personal recovery story. The author’s found that nursing students’ perceptions changed with regard to their knowledge, attitude, and judgement following the interactive presentation. Original views about patients struggling with addiction included assumptions that these individuals were selfish, inconsiderate, and “not trying hard enough to give up drugs” (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020, p. 438). Participants stated that the presentation helped change their views; they reported less bias and increased patient understanding. One participant stated that hearing a recovery story changed their bias since they were “much more understanding of addictions…[and therefore able] to be more sympathetic and more able to help them” (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020, p. 438). The experience of hearing the story was described as “powerful.” Moreover, participants said it allowed them to further develop their knowledge of disease processes and the impact their professional role can have in the lives of individuals who struggles with addiction (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020).

Leyva-Moral et al. (2021) used narrative photography to study nursing students’ empathy using real-life stories and videos of a patient population experiencing a specific medical diagnosis commonly linked with existing prejudices. The students were encouraged to reflect on how they would feel if they were a patient with a specific medical diagnosis. The students were then asked to provide three photographs or drawings that portrayed this reflection along with an explanation and to present this to a learning group (Leyva-Moral et al., 2021). Leyva-Moral et al. (2021) found that 88% of respondents reported that narrative photography helped them reduce
existing prejudices, consider other ways of looking at things, and understand the role of humanized care. This is vital since problematic substance use is not a choice but a health condition and requires a compassionate approach (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2017). Furthermore, having a deep understanding of addiction can help health care providers decrease addiction stigma (Government of Canada, 2020a).

**Assessing Arts-Based Learning Outcomes**

Antistigma interventions have been evaluated based on improved attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge (Khenti et al., 2019). Assessing arts-based reflective assignments is challenging; therefore, educators can encourage authentic work through self- or peer evaluations (Rieger et al., 2020). Asfaw et al. (2019) discuss graduate counsellor education and the measurement of assessments in addiction-related learning outcomes. The authors used student attitudes as a measurement of evaluation in assessing student beliefs about addictions. They used Wordle—a program that graphically represents chosen words to show a meaning, insight, or change (Asfaw et al., 2019). Students at an American university were assessed before and after they completed the Wordle. After the Wordle, the researchers recorded significant change in attitudes and beliefs about addictions in 17 master’s-level counselling students. Asfaw et al. (2019) concluded that “the counseling students in this study increased their creative and critical thinking, evidenced by their ability to move beyond the view of addictions as only alcohol and drugs and evolving into a recovery and support-based mindset” (p. 122).

Expecting nurses to care for complex patients without adequate training would never be seen as acceptable; the same lens should be applied to addiction. The current opioid crisis requires nurses to provide excellent care to patients with addictions at an increased rate (Lanzillotta-Rangeley et al., 2020). Nursing educators must seek pedagogical approaches that
reflect positive core values related to diversity, inclusion, and cultural responses (National League for Nursing, 2016). Therefore, a deep shift is needed, and a social justice framework is required to translate knowledge that has a profound, meaningful, and transformational effect on students. As an APT in online education, narrative photography transforms how we see the world in a way that other forms of communication cannot (Formato, 2020).

![Diagram of an Intentional and Innovative Framework to Reduce Addiction Stigma in Online Nursing Students]

**Figure 1. An Intentional and Innovative Framework to Reduce Addiction Stigma in Online Nursing Students.** Adapted from Asfaw et al. (2019); Blanchet Garneau et al. (2018); and Leyva-Moral et al. (2021).

Educators should practice from a critical consciousness perspective that aims to provide students with knowledge of addiction and health equity for populations, as well as to help students explore how their attitude can curtail stigma in nursing practice (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2018). This in itself can improve patient experience and outcomes. With this lens, arts-based learning strategies can be used as a disruptive pedagogy that transforms the way we teach, our ways of knowing, and how we are practicing nursing. It is plausible that narrative photography provides an authentic approach to sharing real-life substance use stories with nursing students. It
is equally asserted that online nursing education is a suitable platform to use narrative photography to unveil the prevalence and impact of addiction stigma in health care. Similar to Leyva-Moral et al. (2021), nursing students could present three photographs or drawings of their reflections alongside brief, innovative teaching methods. This approach benefits future nursing student practice through increasing understanding, and potentially empathy, based on student reflections. This leads to awareness of health system inequities for certain populations, guiding nurses to consider what diversity means and how to achieve person-centred care for patients in the wake of the opioid epidemic and ongoing addiction stigma. At least one of the three assigned reflections should be a Wordle. As Asfaw et al. (2019) discussed, the words chosen for the Wordle can depict students’ attitudes and stigma associated with addiction and graphically “illustrate meaning, perception, and change” (p. 115). Figures 1 and 2 provide a framework and practical strategies for educators who wish to adopt this innovative and intentional approach to addiction stigma reduction in online nursing student education.
This recommended inclusive pedagogical approach to addiction stigma would focus on learning outcomes and competencies that allow this type of learning to be accessible to diverse twenty-first-century learners within an antiracist and antidiscriminatory context. As an innovative teaching method, the learning could benefit nursing students’ future practice through increased patient understanding, thus leading to better health outcomes for a diverse patient population while increasing systemic health equity. Moreover, this framework leads to better-prepared nurses that deliver excellent nursing care for all.

**Limitations**

Using arts-based learning to discuss sensitive topics comes with a unique set of challenges (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2018) suggests that diverse classrooms “need to ensure that students develop pro-social and emotional skills and can create positive peer relationships when students learn to communicate openly expressing their emotions, needs at the same time to recognize that they are capable of acknowledging those of others” (p. 614). Arts-based teaching methods can pose challenges for students and instructors who are supporting their learners’ creative processes. To alleviate disorientating experiences for students, educators need to facilitate the process by clarifying, engaging, planning, presenting, and evaluating (Rieger et al., 2020). The proposed framework (Figures 1 and 2) should be evaluated further and would benefit from more research on how these actions align. Creative learning processes can create emotionally charged conditions for students, leading to vulnerability and stress that educators must plan into their teaching environment (Rieger et al., 2020). Furthermore, educators should ensure that students are aware of their control over what they share (Rieger et al., 2020) and can balance this against their comfortability and disclosure considerations.
There is limited research on the process of using emotion-laden pedagogy, such as arts-based practices in intercultural education (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Although art can be used to meet social justice outcomes, it can also unintentionally reinforce stereotypes (Formato, 2020). Therefore, discretion and discernment are required to appropriately use the arts as an inclusive pedagogical application (Formato, 2020). Intentional educational curriculum designs that use a critical, antidiscriminatory pedagogical approach are essential (Blanchet Garneau et al., 2017).

The long-term learning effects of using APTs in education are not well documented in current scholarly peer-reviewed literature. Further research is recommended to assess the long-term effects of learning when teachers employ culturally sustaining and inclusive environments that seek to promote transformative learning with praxis-oriented critical consciousness.

Incorporating APTs in online classrooms presents a unique opportunity to develop studies to bridge these gaps and study the long-term effects.

**Conclusion**

Addiction stigma is evident in health care professionals and nursing students in Canadian health care systems. Nursing education must address this issue due to its profound negative impact on individuals, populations, and health care systems. It is vital to address addiction stigma to improve nursing practice and patient outcomes. Online nursing platforms offer a suitable approach to a culturally sustaining and inclusive pedagogy that effectively educates on social justice issues. Arts-based learning is an effective teaching method for decreasing addiction stigma in online nursing students. Narrative photography is a potential candidate in developing inclusive and effective approaches to reduce addiction stigma and meet social justice learning outcomes in online nursing education. Extending its contribution to nursing academia, arts-based
activities such as narrative photography provide an opportunity to employ culturally sustaining and inclusive environments that seek to promote transformative learning within praxis-oriented critical consciousness.
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