

VIEWPOINTS

Should TED Talks Be Teaching Us Something?

Frank Romanelli, PharmD, MPH,^a Jeff Cain, EdD,^b Patrick J. McNamara, PhD^b

^aAssociate Editor, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*

^bUniversity of Kentucky College of Pharmacy

The nonprofit phenomenon “TED,” the brand name for the concepts of Technology Education and Design, was born in 1984. It launched into pop culture stardom in 2006 when the organization’s curators began offering short, free, unrestricted, and educational video segments.¹ Known as “TED Talks,” these informational segments are designed to be no longer than 18 minutes in length and provide succinct, targeted enlightenment on various topics or ideas that are deemed “worth spreading.”¹ TED Talks, often delivered in sophisticated studios with trendy backdrops, follow a format that focuses learners on the presenter and limited, extremely purposeful visual aids. Topics range from global warming to running to the developing world. Popular TED Talks, such as Sir Ken Robinson’s “Schools Kill Creatively” or Dan Gilbert’s “Why Are We Happy?” can easily garner well over a million views.²

TED Talks are a curious phenomenon for educators to observe. They are in many ways the antithesis of traditional lectures, which are typically 60-120 minutes in length and delivered in cavernous halls by faculty members engaged in everyday academic lives. Perhaps the formality of the lecture is the biggest superficial difference in comparison to casual TED Talks (Table 1). However, TED Talks are not as unstructured as they may appear. Presenters are well coached and instructed to follow a specific presentation formula, which maximizes storyboarding and highlights passion for the subject. While learning is not formally assessed, TED Talks do seem to accomplish their goals of spreading ideas while sparking curiosity within the learner. The fact that some presentations have been viewed more than 16 million times points to the effectiveness of the platform in at least reaching learners and stimulating a desire to click, listen, and learn. Moreover, the TED Talks website is the fourth most popular technology website and the single most popular conference and events website in the world.³

Corresponding Author: Frank Romanelli, PharmD, MPH, 789 South Limestone Road, University of Kentucky College of Pharmacy, Lexington, KY 40536. E-mail: froma2@email.uky.edu

The TED phenomenon may have both direct and subliminal messages for academia. Perhaps an initial question to ponder is whether the TED phenomenon is a logical grassroots educational evolution or a reaction to the digital generation and their preference for learning that occurs “wherever, whenever.”⁴ The diverse cross-section of TED devotees ranging in background and age would seem to provide evidence that the platform does not solely appeal to younger generations of learners. Instead, it suggests that adult learners are either more drawn to digital learning than they think they are or than they are likely to admit. The perceived efficacy of TED once again calls into question the continued reliance of academia on the lecture as the primary currency of learning. TED Talks do not convey large chunks of information but rather present grander ideas. Would TED-like educational modules or blocks of 18-20 minutes be more likely to pique student curiosity across a variety of pharmacy topics, maintain attention span, and improve retention? Many faculty members who are recognized as outstanding teachers or lecturers might confess that they already teach through a TED-like lens. Collaterally, TED Talks or TED-formatted learning experiences might be ideal springboards for incorporation into inverted or flipped classroom environments where information is gathered and learned at home, while ideas are analyzed, debated, and assimilated within the classroom.

Unarguably, TED Talks have given scientists and other researchers a real-time, mass media driven opportunity to disseminate their research, ideas, and theories that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.⁴ Similar platforms or approaches may be able to provide opportunities for the academy to further transmit research to the general public.

The TED approach to idea dissemination is not without its critics. Several authors have criticized TED for flattening or dumbing down ideas so they fit into a preconceived, convenient format that is primarily designed to entertain.^{2,5,6} Consequently, the oversimplified ideas and concepts may provoke little effort from the learner to analyze data, theory, or controversy. Some

Table 1. Comparison of Essential Aspects of “TED Talks” versus Traditional Academic Lectures¹

Aspect	TED Talk	Academic Lecture
Subject	Showcase well-formed ideas New or surprising idea, challenge a belief, new argument to a great basic idea	Concepts and content around specified curricula Convey fundamental principles and concepts surrounding established or emerging basic or experiential science
Goals	Good idea takes evidence or observations and draws a larger conclusion	Focus tends to be on details of the evidence
Timeframe	Sharing ideas, engage audience 18 minutes Evidence for effective attention span on a topic	Educate 45-90 minutes Rationale unknown
Style	Storytelling mode	Lecture style often too structured or rigid
Assessment	Number of views, audience comments	Student assessment, faculty evaluation
Mode	Digital, async viewing	Mixed
Speaker	Topic expert, passionate about the idea	Subject matter expert, often dispassionate
Venue / Context	Relaxed atmosphere / seating Several day conference; varied activities / group interactions	Lecture hall Semester long course; 5-8 hours a day in class
Audience	Engaged group of peers	Student learners
Structure	Make audience care (relatable example or intriguing idea) Explain idea carefully How and why idea could be implemented How the idea could affect the audience	Introduction Objectives Topic 1, Topic 2, Topic 3, etc. Conclusions
Visuals	Images and photos Graphs and infographics (clear - make only one point) Little text, avoid bullet points (different points on different slides)	Images and photos Graphs and infographics (typically numerous points) Text bullet points
Preparation	Script out comments Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse	Not scripted, tend to read slides Usually not rehearsed

may argue that TED gives learners a false sense of simplicity of the real world and reinforces a convenient approach to learning that one rarely encounters in everyday life. TED learners may not be able to conceptualize the academic discourse, footwork, and failures that drive the development of theories, concepts, and new ideas. TED talks are frequently cited as too often presenting overly enthusiastic and positive “infomercialized” bits of data that lack concrete critical assessment.⁶

The debate regarding the exact academic role of TED will likely continue for some time as the platform continues to grow and evolve. In the interim, the academy could learn from the TED phenomenon. While TED has limitations and is subject to valid criticisms, educators could use the talks as a component of an overall course sequence that helps students connect with material or spark student interest in particular topics that are then explored in greater detail within the curriculum. The TED platform could also be used as an

active-learning strategy, where students are either asked to critique an existing TED Talk and/or design their own TED Talk regarding a particular topic of interest or relevance. TED presenters are often selected not only for their expertise on a given topic but also for their ability to effectively and succinctly communicate information to learners. In fact, students familiar with the TED Talk paradigm may hold lecturers to a higher standard given the effectiveness of the platform. In turn, faculty members might be able to improve their own delivery skills by observing TED Talks and adopting techniques used by presenters. Administrators charged with curricular oversight and development might familiarize themselves with the platform and its potential implications for future delivery of information in all settings including higher education. Given the vast reach and impact of the platform to date, it would be shortsighted for both individual educators and the academy to ignore what TED is teaching us.

References

1. TED: Our Organization. <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>. Accessed May 1, 2014.
2. Shea C. The New Academic Celebrity. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. April 14, 2014. <https://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Academic-Celebrity/145845/>. Accessed May 1, 2014.
3. Sugimoto CR, Thelwall M, Lariviere V, et al. Scientists popularizing science: characteristics and impact of TED talks. *PLOS One* 2013;8(e62403):1-7.
4. Blouin RA, Riffée WH, Robinson ET, et al. Roles of innovation in education delivery. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2009;73: Article 154.
5. Tsou A, Thelwall M, Mongeon P, et al. A community of curious souls: an analysis of commenting behavior on TED talks videos. *PLOS One* 2014;9(e93609):1-11.
6. O'Brien C. TED confab is speaking to the masses-and drawing scorn. *Los Angeles Times*. <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/26/business/la-fi-ted-conference-20130226>. Accessed May 1, 2014.