

LETTERS

What Can We Learn from TED Talks?

I read with great interest the article, “Should TED Talks Be Teaching Us Something?” in the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*.¹ With the evolving landscape of pharmacy education and a re-examination of teaching methods such as didactic lectures, I was delighted to see a discussion of a TED-style delivery of didactic information.

While the authors present an equal argument for and against the lessons to be learned from TED Talks, I feel the comparison was oversimplified. The table in the article concerns me in particular.¹ If taken out of context, one could draw conclusions that would impair the progression of pharmacy education. The table attempts to compare a TED Talk to an academic lecture by noting that a TED Talk “shares ideas, engages the audience,” while a lecture is meant to “educate,” or that the audience of a TED Talk is an “engaged group of peers,” whereas the audience of a lecture comprises “student learners.” I would ask, if the student learners (who I would like to point out are future peers) are not engaged, are they actually learning? Furthermore, have they learned the framework in which they can apply the lecture content to various situations?

The “Four Rights of the Pharmacy Educational Consumer” proposed by Romanelli and colleagues state that colleges and schools of pharmacy have a responsibility to provide students the opportunity to learn from faculty members dedicated to best teaching practices, to learn within a curriculum designed to prepare them for the profession, and to have access to resources necessary to succeed.²

In order to meet these rights, faculty members must understand that simply providing factual information to students does not educate. Rather, pharmacy educators should be focused on engaging, provoking, mentoring, and stimulating students to think creatively, critically, and divergently. This is critical because, instead of creating wave after wave of pharmacists who have mastered the art of memorization, by properly engaging them either through a good lecture, TED-style talk, flipped classroom, etc, we are engaging students who can think creatively and will ultimately be better prepared to adapt to the ever-changing environment of the pharmacy profession.

The leaders in pharmacy education have also questioned the utility of traditional academic lectures as a form of teaching and learning.²⁻⁵ Such a re-examination of pharmacy education, while contemporary, is by no means novel. In fact, questioning the methods of pharmacy

education has been taking place since its dawn. In 1871, Albert B. Prescott, dean of the University of Michigan College of Pharmacy at the time, challenged the model of apprenticeship-based education with a model based on providing education in a college laboratory and classroom before apprenticeship.⁶

While a radical idea then, he foresaw a need of the profession to have a strong foundation in chemistry and physical science in addition to practical experience to meet the needs of the future. Romanelli and colleagues continue the mission of Prescott in urging future curricula to fit the needs of the profession of pharmacy in the future.² While they use “pharmacists as immunizers” as an example, they could have easily selected any number of other changes in clinical practice or evidence-based medicine to illustrate that the pace of medicine advancement is faster than the time it takes a student to complete a doctor of pharmacy degree.

However, to meet this need, we must not only learn from TED Talk methodology, but also its message: “Ideas worth spreading.”⁷ I do learn from TED Talks. Sir Ken Robinson, one of the most viewed TED speakers, and also one whom the authors cite, is popular not only for his TED-talk style, but also for his message on education reform.⁸⁻¹⁰ He argues that the current education process in the United States operates as an industrial machine, optimized to achieve outcomes in the form of high grades and performance on standardized tests. In order to facilitate learning, teachers must embrace their profession as a creative one to thereby mentor, stimulate, provoke, and engage students as well as pass on learned information. While doing so—ironically, through a lecture—his theory has stimulated, provoked, and engaged millions of viewers. Importantly, it has changed the way I view education as a whole and how I educate in my classroom by engaging students with an idea and a problem to stimulate critical and divergent thinking.

Thus, debating TED Talk vs the academic lecture in pharmacy education is not questioning the form of didactic education, but instead, questioning the message that the lecture is conveying.

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