

Using TED Talks to teach social determinants of health

Maximize the message with a modern medium

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Our world is characterized by the rapid sharing of messages and knowledge. The ability of ideas to go “viral” demonstrates the infectious way that a concept can travel around the globe. As technological innovations facilitate connection and communication across distances, the landscape of learning is evolving. Lectures can be recorded ahead of time and viewed online, or speakers can use text, voice, and video services (eg, Skype) to present their sessions. Furthermore, some institutions now offer open access to their intellectual property, with a view to increasing accessibility.

Ideas worth spreading

Technology, Entertainment and Design Talks, commonly known as *TED Talks*, are an example of our ability to rapidly disseminate great ideas. These online talks, which are freely available and accessible, allow people worldwide to listen to thought-provoking speakers talk passionately about their areas of expertise (www.ted.com/talks). The TED community seeks to share “ideas worth spreading,” and in doing so potentially educate and inform millions of people. The format of short talks, averaging 10 to 18 minutes, given by expert speakers has garnered worldwide interest and attention, and has even sparked community-organized local TEDx events. The TEDx events allow communities to host their own independent TED-like events with a lineup of speakers in front of a live audience.

The TED concept continues to evolve in response to its environment, speakers, audiences, and users, and draws upon TEDx talks from around the world to amass “a large volume of potentially powerful ideas from which to pick the best.”¹ As a result of innovations such as TED Talks, educators now have more opportunity to make use of technology to enhance learning. Exposing learners to thought-provoking speakers can ignite discussion, debate, and reflection that continues long after a speaker’s 18 minutes are over. Therefore, the TED community represents one form of online information sharing that can be used for educational purposes.

Workshops on the social determinants of health

Recently, faculty in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario have begun to use TED Talks as a springboard for teaching the important concepts of the social determinants of health (SDOHs) to family medicine residents. Social determinants of health are factors that affect health and well-being—the circumstances in which we are born, grow up, live, work, and age. Although these factors might not always directly cause or prevent illness, they are root causes of ill or good health.² There is increasing evidence supporting the importance of addressing these root causes to improve the health of individual patients, their families, and our communities.

Given the high quality of TED Talks available online, Department of Family and Community Medicine teachers have created a series of workshops focused on SDOHs as they relate to primary care. It should be mentioned that other forms of online media could have been used as well; however, the authors chose TED Talks owing to their familiarity with these talks and the range of topics available. Workshops cover topics such as income and social status, housing, food security, gender and women’s health, healthy child development and reduction of child mortality, social support networks and social inclusion, education and literacy, HIV and AIDS, culture, and physical environments.

While not all learners will gravitate toward standard SDOH lectures, integrating TED Talks into the SDOH curriculum might invigorate the discussion and enhance the value of this subject matter for learners. Each workshop uses a TED talk as a launching point for focused discussion. The workshops are created to make use of Prezi presentation software, which is an interactive medium that can highlight key concepts grounded in discussion and thought-stimulating activities. While many alternate presentation formats could be used to achieve the same objective, we have developed these workshops using Prezi to optimize and facilitate presenter flexibility and creative freedom during each presentation.

Future applications

In medicine, the vast amount of knowledge and skills required to practise based on principles of best care obliges us to teach our students with the most effective methods possible. The goals of education in medicine


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are to support and develop highly responsible, caring, and competent physicians with ever expanding roles and responsibilities. Unfortunately, the time available to impart this teaching remains static. Where traditional didactic models might fail as vehicles to convey the growing complexity of health care, we need innovative ways to ensure that knowledge is disseminated efficiently.

The SDOH workshops were disseminated more widely beginning in the fall of 2013 at various University of Toronto family medicine teaching units. These workshops were piloted at 3 sites in 2012 and 2013. Workshops on the model, highlighting its goals and objectives and the vision for future application, were presented at the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Family Medicine Forums in November 2012 and 2013. The 2013 session was entitled "Using TED Talks to teach social determinants of health." A concept presentation will be given at the American Academy of Family Physicians' Family Medicine Global Health Workshop in September 2014. There is a plan to share these materials in an open-access manner in the future as a tool for medical education. There will be a critical need to evaluate this innovative educational approach.

In the spirit of ideas worth spreading, it is hoped that this creative teaching format can indeed be demonstrated to be worth spreading. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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