Chapter 13
How Digital Media like TED Talks Are Revolutionizing Teaching and Student Learning

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ABSTRACT

Launched in 1984, Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) Talks was successfully developed and implemented as a practical way to bring recognized experts together to discuss the latest developments and improve communication and collaboration across these fields. From its embryonic beginning, TED Talks has today expanded exponentially and is now a multi-media vehicle for delivering pioneering work to a global audience. For faculty wishing to bring user-friendly, cutting-edge research and ideas to the classroom, it can be an exciting teaching tool because students can draw from the real life experiences of outstanding professionals who are trailblazers in their fields. This chapter presents assignments that were created using TED Talks and provides a template that can be used to create unique assignments that are compatible with the needs and goals of the course. The template is designed to help faculty craft a learning experience that is embedded in an encouraging environment for innovative approaches and student involvement—where specific student learning objectives exist, along with approaches to assess student learning.

STUDENT LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Recently, faculty at my institution, Long Island University/Brooklyn, were engaged in a rather lively discussion about students not doing the assigned class readings and all too often being distracted by their various digital devices. The conversations further escalated to the usual assumption, namely, that many students today are not committed to their education. In such dialogues, two things immediately strike me. First, they seem to occur all the time and not just at my institution, but in many institutions across New York State, where likeminded faculty purport that technology is somehow robbing children in K-12 and college students of their intellectual capacity and somehow responsible for their academic deficiencies. Second, almost all of their a priori conjectures concerning the effectiveness and practicality of technology in teaching and learning are the result of unexamined and untested hypotheses and assumptions about how today’s students learn. Although there is no direct evidence...
supporting the notion that technology is antithetical to learning, the discussion nevertheless has advanced into popular literature. For example, in the November 2009 article in Psychology Today, entitled Is Technology Making Us Dumber?, the author waxes nostalgic about the good old days of academia, when students knew things because they read “real” books. All these reputed concepts and theories bring home John Dewey’s contention in Democracy and Education (1966): “If we teach today as we taught yesterday we rob our children of tomorrow.” What those who deliver education today throughout the academy need to recognize and adopt is an important practical lesson—our students often communicate best in a familiar digital environment that provides an increasingly richer context for learning. I hasten to emphasize that the inherited teaching methods of the past are not suitable for students now in an age where information exponentially increases at decreasing intervals. If the focus is student learning, as it should be, then it becomes critically important to challenge our students and foster their learning and to do so in ways that promote their personal development. Keeling and Hersh, in We’re Losing Our Minds (2011), encounter colleges and universities today with the same mode of reasoning, that is, existing just as repositories of knowledge, and their only job is to transmit this knowledge to students. The authors passionately argue that this form of education generates passive non-engagement, and that is why employers are dissatisfied with our graduates, who are often unable to compete effectively in the global market. The premise has been presented in other recent texts like Richard Arum’s (2010) controversial Academically Adrift and Andrew DelBanco’s College What It Was, Is and Should Be (2012), all calling for reform in higher education that moves students from simply being “blank slates” to participating in a dialectic that allows them to make associations between material within and across disciplines; as a result, students will be able to think critically about those connections and learn how to problem solve using these various understandings.

Noted columnist Malcolm Freidman and foreign policy professor Michael Mendelbaum, in their recent book, That Used to be Us (2011), outline four major issues facing America today, two of which focus on globalization and the instructive power of information technology; however, they recognize that the American educational system is not preparing students to perform in the global arena or to use technology effectively, that is, to elevate all aspects of student learning in an environmental setting familiar to learners. This apparent struggle in the academy, namely, to engage students in a curriculum that appreciates the value of technology in an interconnected world, will be at the heart of how America will fare in the 21st century. Freidman and Mendelbaum are blunt when they opine:

As a country we have not yet adapted to this new reality. We don’t think of education as an investment in national growth and national security because throughout our history it has been a localized, decentralized issue, not a national one. Today, however, what matters is not how your local school ranks in its county or state but how America’s schools rank in the world (pp. 101-102).

Mark Taylor, like others who agree with this view, points out that:

... new media and communication technologies have triggered explosive growth in the amount of information to which people have ready access. Not only is the quantity of information growing, its substance is also changing. This has important implications for the reorganization of knowledge and, by extension, higher education (p. 112).

The higher education community can no longer assume that long accepted forms of teaching and delivery of information are going to be effective in connecting students to and preparing them for this increasingly changing educational landscape. Coupling inherited pedagogies with traditional modes of learning is no longer successful for
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