

Chapter 21

Teaching Taboo Topics Through Technology

Piya Sorcar
Stanford University, USA

Clifford Nass
Stanford University, USA

ABSTRACT

Solving the problem of how to provide effective health education on diseases subject to social taboos is an immediate need. The social stigma of HIV/AIDS is particularly prominent in the developing world, where 95 percent of all HIV-infected persons live. Millions of people risk death from HIV/AIDS while cultures and laws resist change. New approaches must be created to provide education despite whatever social, structural, cultural, and legal barriers exist. Fortunately, the emergence of new media and information and communication technologies (ICT) has provided new ways to help bypass social taboos and provide effective education. This chapter discusses these challenges and presents criteria for evaluating the efficacy of educational campaigns aimed at promoting awareness relating to taboo topics using a specially designed HIV/AIDS curriculum—Interactive Teaching AIDS—as an exemplar. It incorporates key pedagogical and communication theories and approaches in order to maximize its efficacy. To provide psychological comfort and promote coherent understanding, this ICT-based application couples the presentation of biological aspects of transmission with culturally-familiar euphemisms and metaphors to communicate ideas about prevention measures. Created using a rigorous, iterative, and research-based process, the 20-minute application provides detailed yet accessible culturally-appropriate explanations of all key aspects of HIV/AIDS prevention. For people living in areas that cannot easily access explicit HIV/AIDS materials due to social, cultural or other constraints, the positive results of the authors' study suggest that it is possible to design curricula that are socially-acceptable and accurate, that promote significant gains in learning, retention, and changes in attitudes. Furthermore, these materials can encourage learners to proactively seek more information regarding the taboo topic and share prevention information with others. Educators who are reticent to teach about such subjects due to embarrassment or lack of health expertise can utilize similar approaches to educate students.

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INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING ABOUT TABOO TOPICS

This chapter discusses the challenges of providing education about topics that are considered taboo but must be taught to protect public health and welfare. A conceptualization of taboos is presented, and various ways through which technology can enable one to address taboo subjects while respecting social and cultural norms and values is discussed. Drawing on theoretical and empirical literature, advantages and disadvantages of various information and communication technologies (ICT)¹ and other strategies for providing the requisite information and persuasion necessary to address taboo topics effectively are analyzed. Criteria are presented for evaluating the effectiveness of such educational campaigns and curricula. Following this, the procedures one should employ to develop appropriate messages for ICT are discussed, using a recent AIDS campaign—*Interactive Teaching AIDS*—as an exemplar. *Interactive Teaching AIDS* is an ICT-based application designed by the *TeachAIDS*² organization to provide evidence-based, culturally-appropriate HIV/AIDS prevention education to audiences for whom discussing topics related to sexual practices is considered taboo.

Laws and Norms

Virtually all societies have formal rules of behavior, called laws, which are defined by the state and enforced by a formal governmental apparatus. Even in democratic societies aiming to maximize individual freedom, laws are enforced independent of whether the individual members of the society believe that the rules reflect extant value systems or not (Maine, 2004). Even the most unpopular laws must be enforced to ensure the legitimacy of the entire legal system (Weber, 1978).

All societies also have informal rules of behavior, called norms, which are defined by culture and traditions. While many norms are embodied

in and enforced by laws, there are also norms that simply set expectations of behaviors. That is, norms are enforced by general societal pressure (sometimes in addition to that of the state) or the collective infliction of non-legal sanctions on deviants, those who disobey the norms, subjecting them to stigmatization, criticism, ostracism, or even non-state force (Posner, 2002).

In addition to the distinction between laws and norms, there is also an important distinction between positive versus negative laws and norms. Positive laws and norms prescribe behaviors that individuals are required or pressured to perform. For example, almost all nations have laws requiring children to attend at least some school, some nations have laws requiring military service, and a few legally compel voting. Similarly, there are negative laws and norms, defining what people must not do: murder is illegal in virtually all societies, theft is illegal in most societies, and gum chewing is banned in a few societies, for example. In democratic societies, laws are primarily negatively stated—anything that is not expressly forbidden is permitted—while in totalitarian societies, laws are often positively stated—and anything that is not expressly permitted may be forbidden. Societies also have positive norms which are not related to their laws: virtually all cultures encourage age-based rituals, many cultures have words that are supposed to be spoken to elders, and a few specify markers that should be placed on homes.

Taboos

The focus of this research is on *taboos*—negative norms that involve actions, practices, or states that carry a strong social stigma³. The word *taboo* comes from the Tongan word *tabu* (Webster's Dictionary, 2003), for “forbidden” or “banned”. Captain Cook defined the notion of taboo during his third voyage around the world (Allan & Burrige, 2006) and introduced it into English in 1784, through a publication accounting his trip to Tahiti (Thody, 1997).

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