

A JPHMP Direct Post

Equity in Communication: A Policy Template for Promoting Organizational Health Literacy

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Abstract

This *JPHMP Direct Post* is the companion post to the commentary article published in the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, titled “The Ever-Evolving Nature of Health Literacy in Organizations: A Commentary on the 2021 *JPHMP* Article: ‘Updating Health Literacy for Healthy People 2030.’” The policy template presented in this post provides the reader with ideas on how they could promote organizational health literacy within their own and other organizations. The reader may jump straight to the policy template, should they wish. Use the hyperlinked Table of Contents (next page) or the bookmarks tool within the PDF reader being used to view this post. This post contains an overview of the policy template, followed by the steps used to develop the policy template. A brief discussion is presented at the end.

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Overview

This *JPHMP Direct Post* presents the steps and experience used to develop the policy template mentioned in the article titled, “The Ever-Evolving Nature of Health Literacy in Organizations: A Commentary on the 2021 *JPHMP* Article: ‘Updating Health Literacy for Healthy People 2030’”. As stated in the article, the purpose of introducing the policy template was to provide organizations with further support in developing organizational health literacy.¹ Given that diverse organizations communicate health-related information², a set of policy guidelines that could be readily adopted to promote organizational health literacy is needed.³ Such guidelines would enable staff to foster or expand equity within the materials disseminated by their organization.⁴ Moreover, the provided policy template gives a start which organizations could build upon in efforts to meet health promotion objectives laid out in *Healthy People 2030* (or another guiding framework for health policy within in their region).⁵

The policy template was developed through a college service-learning project, where the first author created a research summary video for college students and professionals. The video summarized research on common design issues that impede use of lay educational material among patients and the public. The student created the video using skills for critically appraising lay material quality, such as those outlined in the resource book, *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills*.⁶ The activities used to create the research summary video were the basis to several activities listed in the policy template. Consistent evidence suggests service-learning is an effective teaching strategy among college students.⁷ Using the policy template could extend this high impact teaching practice into healthcare and other settings (for ways to overcome potential logistical barriers, see the article by Surr et al.⁸). The steps used to create the summary video and policy template are presented within the remaining sections of this post, followed by a discussion.

Methods & Materials

The Research Summary Video

For the service-learning project which occurred between June and September of 2020, a short video (i.e., less than 7 minutes in duration, composed in English) was created by the first

author (who at the time was an undergraduate public health student).⁹ Editorial supervision was provided by the third author who also served as the project supervisor (the third author is a faculty member trained in kinesiology and public health). The project's aims were to: (1) create a plain language and short video summary to an article of original and peer reviewed research focused on lay material quality, (2) engage professionals/students in activities to help them understand common design issues in lay material, and (3) prompt viewers to practice correcting the design issues presented in the video. The video was of a recorded slideshow presentation developed using *PowerPoint* computer (Office 365 version, Microsoft Corporation). The steps in creating the summary video entailed reading and summarizing key points from the select, peer reviewed research article published in 2020, as well as reviewing guidelines for slide layout and design.¹⁰

Teaching Example: Graphic Summary of Research Article Main Findings

Graphics were created based on the most relevant take-a-ways from the research article, and they highlighted areas where online articles were consistently lacking. The goal was to highlight the lack of suitable materials and equip the audience with the skills needed to create suitable resources and adjust existing resources for their intended audience. A bar graph was made with the free (i.e., basic) subscription plan for the online tool, *Infogram*¹¹, which was used to highlight the top unsatisfactory subcategories in a sample of online articles reported on in the research article.² The researchers used the Suitability Assessment of Materials (SAM) method¹² to rate the suitability of online physical activity promotion articles, which were produced by a diverse set of organizations and covered a range of topics.² A pie chart was also made with the *Infogram* software, and it broke down overall suitability levels of the sample articles, which were either unsatisfactory, satisfactory, or optimal in accordance with SAM guidelines¹² and the interpretive nomenclature proposed by Thomas and Cardinal.¹³

Teaching Example: Reading Grade Level Suitability

A demonstration of reading grade level reduction was performed using two blocks of text placed side by side. To emphasize the difference in readability level between the two texts, words with three or more syllables were bolded in both. The audience was prompted in the video recording to pause the video and read through both versions and compare how easy it was to read

each one. The SMOG reading grade level formula was used in this teaching example.¹⁴ The reference material for the reading grade level teaching example was obtained from the research presentation by Tse et al.¹⁵

Teaching Example: Layout and Design Suitability

An interactive activity was created with *Infogram*, which was used to create before and after images of a mock web article. The before image of the mock article purposefully included insufficient materials in three categories: (1) graphic captions, (2) relevant graphics, and (3) summary included. The select categories were common suitability issues observed in the summarized research article² and in previous research.¹⁶ The audience was given the definition of suitable materials and asked to brainstorm ways the mock web article could be improved. After 60 seconds, sample changes that would improve the mock web article according to the SAM were shown, then explained. Together, this and the previous teaching examples summarized modeled ways to assess and revise lay material for improved suitability.¹⁷

Recording the Video Summary

Using similar methods used by Thomas and colleagues¹⁸, the free access option for the online tool, *Screencast-O-Matic*, was used to record the slideshow presentation with audio narration.¹⁹ Several drafts of the video were produced until the first and third author agreed the latest draft met guidelines dissemination to a diverse audience of professionals and college students (e.g., plain language, succinct, used a distraction-free slide layout).¹⁰ The video was pilot tested using an anonymous online questionnaire with a small group of undergraduate college students majoring in biology, kinesiology, and public health (five day grace period, July 30-August 3, 2020, $N = 8$, 62.5% response rate). Participants unanimously felt the summary video was interesting, helpful, and clear. The human subject component of the project received Institutional Review Board approval from first and third authors' university. Feedback gathered in the pilot test that was used to make final edits to the video (e.g., correct minor errors in grammar, respond to suggestion to slow the speaking speed down).

Discussion

As stated in the companion article to this *JPHMP Direct Post*, research results suggest that many individuals who select or design lay material do not understand factors that affect health literacy.²⁰ This gap in knowledge is problematic, given the primary role of health material is to promote health literacy.⁴ Thus, the video summary project, which preceded the policy template presented in this post, was conceptualized as a means of encouraging college students and professionals to learn about common design issues affecting lay material, then resolve to address them in their own practice. Accordingly, the research summary video ends with a call to action towards that end and supplies viewers with resources in getting started.⁹ The service-learning project was educationally valuable to the first author too, having reviewed research in the area and through applying techniques for developing lay material to create the research summary video.

Subsequently, the first and third author realized that in order for training material to gain wide use in settings where they are most needed, organizational policy aligned with a public health mission is crucial.³ Public health policy entails “laws, regulations, actions, and decisions implemented within society in order to promote wellness and ensure that specific health goals are met”^{21(para. 2)}. As mentioned in the companion article to this post, research strategies to develop organizational health literacy policy is not new²², yet dissemination of resource material with a limited ability to promote health literacy has remained common.^{4,23} The first author resolved to present at a professional conference on the value of the service-learning project from an undergraduate student’s perspective. The first and third author were ultimately successful in presenting on the video summary project at a 2021 professional conference focused on public health practice and policy.²⁴ They devised, *apriori*, to use their presentation to encourage the wide adoption of service-learning experiences like that of the video summary project, including beyond the college setting. The idea for the policy template was born.

The policy template for promoting organizational health literacy was developed using the results of a reflexive thematic analysis to identify specific skills supported by the service-learning project and by reviewing the Health In All Policies framework.²⁵ Both steps were performed by the first author and supervised by the third author. The Health in All Policies

framework was used to further align any policy suggestions with the prevailing aims for public health policy.²¹

According to Emeline Brulé, reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to analyzing qualitative data to answer research questions about individuals' experiences, views, perceptions, and representations of a given phenomenon.²⁶ In this case, the first author used reflexive thematic analysis to conceptualize what skills she had developed, grounded in the activity and experiences of the service-learning project.²⁷ Specifically, the first author reviewed the software and guidelines she used throughout the process in creating the research summary video, paired with annotations she made in reflecting on specific skills she sensed she had acquired or further developed through the service-learning project. Pooling the observations from her review and reflection together generated a set of themes signifying cognitive and technical skills developed through the service-learning project.²⁷ Specifically, four thematic skills were conceptualized from the data: (1) learn/grow multi-media skills, (2) learn/grow plain language communication skills, (3) learn to anticipate pitfalls in designing resource material, and (4) learn to solicit and use end-user feedback.

To elaborate, the multimedia skills were developed through practice creating a slideshow presentation, working with software to create graphics, and designing an interactive activity, and creating a video summary. Plain language communication skills were practiced not only in the oral presentation of the slides, but also in developing the slides and learning to apply guidelines for font type, text size and color, page layout, etc. The student came to recognize the value of the set of presentation guidelines, namely to optimize accessibility of the presentation. Feedback from fellow research assistants working in the same lab as the first author was incorporated in the presentation, which also confirmed she had actualized competency in developing a plain language multimedia presentation for college students (i.e., undergraduates). An area of future research would include soliciting feedback from professionals or graduate level students.²⁸

The list of skills creating the research summary video supported overlaps with Erwin and Brownson's list of required capabilities for the public health practitioner of the future.²⁹ They state that, "the public health practitioner of the future will require new skills, knowledge, and abilities, as well as new ways of conceptualizing, to successfully attend to the many forces of

change affecting her or his practice environment.”²⁹ (p.1231) One skill that they mention is communication, specifically sifting noise from substance, and they note the need for new approaches to curriculum design for those in academics. This echoes the need for policy development to train health students and officials in creating suitable materials.³⁰

The article by Erwin and Brownson also calls for new ways of conceptualizing health information. With all the emerging technology available to consumers, people are receiving their health material using various new online platforms (e.g., social media platforms), but Erwin and Brownson note that changing the platform that health material is accessed by does not mean that there is any better communication currently available.²⁹ The statements within the provided policy template can be adopted as part of a broader policy initiative supporting the creation of quality resource materials across current and new communication channels and methods. Specifically, the provided policy template supports training of health students and current professionals to address quality resource issues in their practice or line of work.¹⁷

Creating the Policy Template and Concluding Thoughts

The first author reviewed a document on Health in All Policies and reviewed the definition of a policy statement to inform how draft policy statements would be composed and how they could form the basis for lasting impact and health improvement across populations. She developed activities that would each support at least one of the five key elements in the Health in All Policies framework, which are included in the policy template presented in this post (see Table 1). The policy template presents policy language concerning educational activities, objectives of the activity and policy statements which an organization could adopt to create space and support in completing the educational activities. Visually, the policy template shows how activities, objectives, policy language align together and with a specific key element in the Health in All Policies framework. Categories are not mutually exclusive, and the reader may see activities, objectives, and policy language alignment with multiple key elements in the Health in All Policies framework. Given organizational health literacy focuses on ability of staff to ensure health communications made by the organization are equitable¹, the activities in the policy template should help students and professionals practice creating quality resource materials that are equitable.^{17,31} Moreover, they could promote a value of being aware or locating

ways an organization may fall short of meeting standards for lay communication, which the organizational health literacy definition advanced in Healthy People 2030 represents.¹

Table 1. Policy Template for Promoting Organizational Health Literacy

Activity	Supporting policy	Health in All Policies connection	Building capacity: Prompts for dialogue and action
Define suitability; create and revise a mock article.	Health students must learn about the importance of suitability and practice creating suitable materials.	Promote health, equity, and sustainability.	1. After revision of the mock article, refer back to the suitability definition and assess any improvements in the article.
Employees watch a summary video or read a summary article on suitability issues that affect the health field.	Provide time and compensation for employees to learn about suitability issues.	Create structural or procedural change.	2. Prompt employees to think about how they might address suitability issues in their workplace.
Find an online consent form, and revise it to be more suitable. Design a survey to get feedback on the revisions from community members.	Health students must be comfortable revising diverse forms of health materials and soliciting feedback from community members.	Engage stakeholders.	3. Discuss why it is important that this material be well suited to its intended audience.
Read through Ch. 4 of <i>Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills</i> , which includes the SAM coding form.	Health students will be familiar with the SAM coding form to assess suitability of materials.	Promote health, equity, and sustainability.	4. Discuss what are some components of the SAM coding form that were surprising or that students had not thought of before.

<p>Pick a health topic and create a brief mock article. Include context before each paragraph.</p>	<p>Health students must have practice writing a suitable article.</p>	<p>Promote health, equity, and sustainability.</p>	<p>5. Refer to the definition of suitability. Discuss how the addition of context before each paragraph improves the suitability of the article.</p>
<p>Interns in secondary school or college are trained to evaluate the suitability of material used at their site of internship.</p>	<p>Student interns must be previously trained in suitable material evaluation and must apply this training to their workplace internship.</p>	<p>Support intersectoral collaboration.</p>	<p>6. Reflect on how an increase in suitable materials created by the place of internship might improve health equity and/or outcomes.</p>

The policy statements presented in this table focus on helping students and professionals practice creating quality resource material. The first column lists activities that aim to train individuals in suitable content creation. The second column presents policy statements that could provide the basis for a policy template or outline that could be adopted by groups, and the third column identifies a key element of the Health in All Policies approach that is supported by the policy statements. The last column contains suggestions for the activities.

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