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Nutrition Educators Learn Plain Language Basics: On-Line, Quick and Easy

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<http://osu.orst.edu/dept/ehe/nutrition.htm>

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The number of nutrition educators has increased in the United States particularly in Oregon in the last ten years. Part of that increase is due to the number of nutrition education programs for audiences with low incomes that are delivered by the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES). CSREES provides community-based programs and information around agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being. In plain language, this means that Extension provides programs in the community that meet people's needs such as food safety, managing money and eating healthfully. The Extension Service, as it is known, can be found in every state and territory and locally, at the county level. For example, in Oregon there are 36 counties. In 1999 there were 5 counties with nutrition education programs; as of October 1, 2002, there will be 23 counties employing nutrition educators. This is a HUGE increase.

With the increased number of nutrition educators it is important that, at a minimum, they be aware of plain language issues as they develop or choose nutrition education materials. It has been my observation that trained nutritionists/dietitians do not always learn plain language basics in school or as part of internships. I know I did not and I received academic training that included undergraduate and graduate levels.

Thus, on-the-job training is necessary. However, the reality is, there are barriers to training. Do these sound familiar to you? In Oregon, too much to do and too little time is an issue for staff. Often it is difficult to find the time to schedule training. Even if there were enough time to conduct face-to-face plain language workshops, large geographic distances are a reality for many Oregon staff. Some staff would have to drive eight hours to a training site. And increasingly, limited budgets often mean that training opportunities are curtailed.

In 1997 when I began my position as state nutrition specialist I wanted to develop a unique web site. There are numerous nutrition web sites but my vision was to develop a web site for nutrition educators interested in information, resources, tips and skill-building so that they can more effectively work with low income, culturally diverse audiences and develop nutrition education programs. This web site has been rated "Among the Best" by Tufts University's Nutrition Navigator which scores nutrition web sites.

My idea was to provide plain language information as one component of my web site. When I surveyed Oregon staff in May of 1997, half or 50% expressed interest in learning how to develop easy-to-read nutrition materials via the Web. My idea was to develop modules that had certain characteristics: 1) they would be short – ideally it would take less than 10 minutes to complete them (keeping in mind that staff were challenged by time pressures); 2) they would contain key messages thus ensuring that the modules were kept short; 3) they would not be “tech heavy” or contain so many “bells and whistles” that users could not access them; and 4) they would not be costly (Guess what? There was no money to produce them).

In the summer of 1997 I drafted two modules and engaged nine people to review them – eight were from Oregon, one was from the Federal level in Washington, D.C.: 1) two nutritionists from the state health department; 2) one nutritionist from the Oregon Food Bank; 3) four Extension staff; 4) one nutritionist from the United State government’s Food and Nutrition Information Clearinghouse, National Agricultural Library; and 5) one local literacy program coordinator.

Here is a sample module. (See: <http://osu.orst.edu/dept/ehe/nutrition.htm>) As you can see it is simple, it focuses on key messages - this one on writing style. It contains concrete examples that nutrition educators would recognize and it links to examples of nutrition education materials that apply the strategies mentioned in the module. As reinforcement the module ends with ways users can apply strategies.

The review of the two modules I developed was conducted via email in the fall of 1997. The two modules were somewhat different in content and length. The one titled “The Changing Face of Literacy” provided information about literacy – what it is, the extent of the problem in the U.S. and Oregon.. The module titled “Just Say It!” was very short and focused on one skill - writing more simply using word substitutions.

What did I ask of the field-testers? First: how long did it take them to complete each module? For the “Changing Face of Literacy” module this ranged from five to ten minutes, the average: 8 minutes. Field testers responded that the “Just Say It!” module took three to fifteen minutes to review, the average: seven minutes. (there was one person that said it took fifteen minutes so I felt that this was an outlier). I felt that I had achieved one goal – keep the modules short.

I asked field testers about the amount of information. For the “Changing Face of Literacy” module, three-quarters or 75% said the amount of information was about right, 12 ½% said there was too much information and 12 ½% said there was not enough. For the “Just Say It!” module, no one said there was too much information, 42% said the information was about right and 57% said there was not enough. Remember, this was the shorter module that addressed only one skill – using word substitutions. By contrasting these two modules I could see how much information to include in other modules if I chose to develop more.

Lastly, I asked reviewers about the quality of the information. A majority of the field testers for the “Changing Face of Literacy” module, 87.5% said the information was clear – this increased to 100% for the “Just Say It!” module. Three-quarters or 75% said the “Changing Face of Literacy” module focused on needed information – 100% for the “Just Say It!” module. All reviewers or 100% of the “Changing Face of Literacy” said they would recommend the module to others; 71% for the “Just Say It!” module.

In addition to the two modules that were originally developed and field-tested there were two more that were developed: 1) Easy-to-read: The Layout of Your Materials which covers the use of headings and graphic elements like boxes, balancing white space with text and font size; and 2) Writing Style and How It Influences Readability which covers using the active voice and how the reader can interact with written material. All four of these modules were placed on my web site at <http://osu.orst.edu/dept/ehe/nutrition.htm>

After the modules were on-line for a period of time, a feedback form was added. During 2000 and 2001 thirty-one people responded. When asked if the modules met their needs, 58% agreed or strongly agreed (almost 4 in 10 strongly agreeing). An overwhelming majority (97%) said they would use what they learned in the modules.

Who were the respondents to this on-line survey? Most were students (61%), almost 1 in 4 (23%) were dietitians or nutritionists and 16% were “other” which included an occupational therapist and a personal trainer/aerobics instructor.

Written comments included:

“Concise, clear and helpful. I’d like more.”

“Like format of short pieces with more in-depth information linked to the site.”

“I’m glad the modules were concise and did not take long to work through. I loved the fact that it was interactive. Great job!”

“Just wanted to let you know how useful your literacy modules are. I’m teaching a course in nutr. Ed, and we are discussing literacy this week. I’m going to direct the students to your web site and have them review the literacy modules. I learned about this from an APHA (American Public Health Association) nutrition section newsletter. Thanks for sharing your expertise.” --- nutrition faculty at an American university

It is gratifying to know that students are being reached with this information. As I stated previously, many are not exposed to plain language skills and information during their academic coursework.

Some of the modules have been published in materials such as the “Diabetes Patient Education Manual” and “Pain Management Patient Education Resource Manual” – both products of Aspen Publishing.

In closing, these modules serve a purpose for those in the health and nutrition field seeking quick and focused information about developing or identifying easy-to-read materials.



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Ellen Schuster is a Nutrition and Food Specialist with Extension Family and Community Development at Oregon State University. She leads, in 16 counties, programs in nutrition education that are targeted at those with limited resources. Her Web-based materials (address above) are nationally recognized in the U.S. and have been rated "Among the Best" by Tufts University.