The Health Educator Readership Survey, 2011: Reporting the Results

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Abstract

Readership surveys can help editors assess satisfaction with a journal as well as identify potential modifications to be made. The editorial staff of *The Health Educator* conducted an online readership survey in the summer of 2011. After a five-week data solicitation and collection period, a total of 504 Eta Sigma Gamma (ESG) members responded. When members not receiving *The Health Educator* were removed, the final sample included 344 members. Results revealed that, overall members were satisfied with the content and quality of the journal. Notable recommendations include increasing the number of Health Education in Practice articles, offering Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) and Master Certified Health Education Specialist (MCHES) Continuing Education Contact Hours (CECH), and indexing the journal in MEDLINE. Surveying ESG members regarding their readership habits and preferences on different aspects of *The Health Educator* provided insight for the editorial staff as they consider modifications that may improve quality of the journal and increase reader satisfaction.

Introduction

The Health Educator, Journal of Eta Sigma Gamma, is one of three publications of the National Health Education Honorary. The other two publications are *The Eta Sigma Gamma Monograph Series* and *The Vision* (electronic newsletter). Articles published in *The Health Educator* (hereafter referred to as the journal) are intended to promote ESG's mission of furthering excellence in teaching, research, and service. Articles accepted for publication in the journal typically fall within the categories of research, literature review, commentary, practical application, and teaching ideas (ESG, 2011).

Readership surveys are important because they can help journal editors identify trends in readership as well as modifications that may need to be made to the journal to improve quality and increase credibility and readership. When researching readership trends, Bellanca (2008) found that researchers and professionals are currently reading more articles than in past years, but as the number of articles read and total time spent reading increases, the amount of time spent per article is decreasing. Journal editors must pay attention to this type of readership information in order to adapt to the needs of their readers.

Due to increasing use of technology to communicate messages and transfer research in recent years (Impedovo & Greene, 2007), journal editors must also become aware of their audience's preferences for reading the journal content – print-based or online. Nearly 15 years ago, many health professionals were already researching articles online instead of going to the library to receive a print version of their article (Curtis, Weller, & Hurd, 1997). Today, searching for articles online is commonplace and researchers are more likely to access articles from one's office (54%) than searching online from home (34%) (Berquist, 2008). Age is a factor that affects practices of reading journals online. While reading a printed Portable Document Format article is still the most favored means for researchers, students and researchers under the age of 30 are much more likely to research and read journal articles online (Bellanca, 2008). Another factor that is becoming more important as researchers perform searches for literature online is use of key words or search terms in electronic databases. Because less time is being spent on reading per article, editors and authors must take extra care in highlighting the most important information and graphics to catch the reader's eye (Bellanca, 2008).

Another technology trend is an increase in the use of the Internet for conducting readership surveys. Online readership surveys have pros and cons, however. On the positive side, the cost of administering online surveys is generally much less expensive than sending mail surveys. Sending an online survey makes it possible to distribute the survey to the entire population or membership as well, instead of having to send the survey to only a small sample of the population. They also tend to generate faster response rates as online surveys take only seconds to send to a large number of participants and data can be accessed almost immediately after the survey is completed (Clarke, 2002). On the other hand, those who administer online surveys generally get a lower response rate. While print-based surveys typically get a 50-60% response rate, online surveys typically only receive a response rate of 20-30% (Clarke, 2002). Finally, it is important to note that another drawback of online survey administration is the possibility that the sample could potentially be biased simply because the survey is online. For example, it may be only the younger, more technically savvy subjects that participate in a study utilizing online data collection methods (Clarke, 2002).

In an effort to continue meeting the needs of readers of *The Health Educator*, the editorial staff decided to assess

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reader satisfaction. Specifically, the purpose was to assess ESG members' reading habits, satisfaction, and acceptance of potential online conversion of *The Health Educator*.

Methods

Researchers developed a 21-item survey to assess reader satisfaction of *The Health Educator.* Survey items were modified from other readership surveys (Bell, 2008; International Hospital Federation, 2008) and were intended to address readership habits; satisfaction with content, quality, attractiveness, and organization; importance of offering CECH; preferences for indexing; importance of journal impact factor; and acceptance of and preferences for online conversion of the journal. Once the survey was reviewed and edited by the editorial staff and Institutional Review Board approval was granted, it was posted to www.SurveyMonkey.com® in July 2011. A mass e-mail in blind copy format was sent to all ESG members requesting their participation in the study. The email provided ESG members with a web link to access the web-based survey at their convenience. To increase response rate, a weekly reminder e-mail was sent out during the five week data collection period.

Results

During the five-week data collection period, researchers received 504 responses. One hundred fifty-six ESG members who responded to the survey did not receive *The Health Educator,* and therefore, were not eligible to complete the survey. Three hundred forty-four ESG members reported receiving *The Health Educator,* and their surveys were included in the analyses. Of those who completed the survey, the majority (60.0%, $n = 205$) were under the age of 35 with the highest percentage of respondents between the ages of 18-24 (39.2%, $n = 134$). Another 20.8% ($n = 71$) were between the ages of 25-34. See Table 1 for numbers of respondents by age. Eighty-three percent ($n = 286$) of participants were female, and 90.1% ($n = 300$) had a degree in or were currently majoring in health education at the time of the survey.

When asked which best described their workplace setting, 23.8% ($n = 81$) reported being full-time students, 22.0% ($n = 75$) reported working in a post-secondary setting, 11.4% ($n = 39$) reported a school workplace, and 8.2% ($n = 28$) reported a medical workplace. The remaining 23.3% ($n = 79$) reported a worksite, organization/foundation, government, retired, self-employed, or unemployed workplace setting; and 11.4% ($n = 39$) reported a workplace setting that was not a survey response option (e.g., clerical, retail) suggesting that some readers were not employed in the health education field or failed to check the appropriate work setting (e.g., university faculty vs. marking post-secondary as a setting). See Table 1 for additional demographics.

Of the respondents who were students, the majority (53.0%, $n = 105$) were enrolled in undergraduate programs. Of the 37% enrolled in graduate/professional programs, 23.2% ($n = 46$) were master's students, 18.7% ($n = 37$) were doctoral students, and 5.1% ($n = 10$) were enrolled in a professional degree program.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Age

Answer options	Percent	Frequency
18-24	39.2	134
25-34	20.8	71
35-44	10.8	37
45-54	12.3	43
55-64	14.0	48
65 or older	2.9	10

Gender

Answer options	Percent	Frequency
Female	83.4	286
Male	16.6	57

Workplace setting

Answer options	Percent	Frequency
None, full-time student	23.8	81
Post-secondary	22.0	75
School	11.4	39
Other (please specify)	11.4	39
Medical	8.2	28
Community	5.3	18
Government	5.3	18
Unemployed	4.1	14
Organization/Foundation	3.8	13
Worksite	1.8	6
Retired	1.8	6
Self-employed	1.2	4

The majority of respondents (73.2%, $n = 273$) who completed the survey had been receiving the journal for five years or less. Almost 38% (37.5%, $n = 140$) of respondents had received the journal for less than one year, 25.5% ($n = 95$) had received the journal for one to two years, and 22.5% ($n = 84$) had received the journal for over eight years. When asked if they received the journal on a regular basis, 81.4% ($n = 297$) said they did receive the journal on a regular basis while 18.6% ($n = 68$) said they receive the journal with interruption.

Reading Habits

Researchers asked respondents about their reading habits once they received the journal. The response most often reported was that members read the journal within one month of receipt (40.6%, $n = 138$). The second most commonly reported answer was "I usually read it within

one week of receipt" (29.4%, $n = 100$), followed by "I have issues over six months old that I have not yet read" (17.4%, $n = 59$), and "I usually read it within six months of receipt" (12.6%, $n = 43$).

Researchers also asked ESG members what they typically read upon receipt of the journal. Participants were able to choose more than one answer. The most common response was reading the table of contents to find articles of interest (85.1%, $n = 298$). "Reading the complete text of one or two articles" was the next most common response option selected (38.6%, n = 135). Nearly 28% (27.7%, $n = 97$ indicated that they read the information inside the front cover (ESG Board of Directors contact information). Over a quarter of respondents (26.9%, $n = 94$) indicated they usually scan the issue but rarely read any articles. Few readers (19.4%, $n = 68$) indicated they read the complete text of more than two articles. See Table 2 for additional responses.

Content and Quality

Researchers also assessed participants' satisfaction with the content and quality of *The Health Educator.* When asked to rate the journal overall on a 5-point scale (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = no opinion, 4 = good, 5 = excellent), the majority of respondents rated the journal as good (63.9%, $n = 207$) or excellent (22.8%, $n = 74$) with a mean of 4.04. Fewer than 1% (0.9 %, $n = 3$) of respondents gave the journal a rating of very poor, while 3.7% ($n = 12$) gave the journal a rating of poor.

Readers' assessment of the quality of the content was most often rated as good (66.1%, $n = 213$) or excellent (19.6%, $n = 63$) with a mean rating of 4.00. When asked for an overall assessment of the organization of journal content, the majority (83.3%, $n = 268$) rated organization as good (63.4%, $n = 204$) or excellent (19.9%, $n = 64$) with a mean rating of 3.98. See Table 3 for a complete reporting of these ratings. Cover attractiveness was rated good by 45.4% ($n = 148$) of respondents while 19.9% ($n = 65$) had no opinion about the cover and 19.6% ($n = 64$) rated the attractiveness of the journal's cover as poor. The mean rating for cover attractiveness was 3.42; this was the lowest mean score of the assessments.

In addition, a majority of respondents rated the content to be interesting (65.5%, $n = 235$) and the font size to be easy to read (89.5%, $n = 316$). The final method for assessing reader satisfaction was to ask ESG members to rate, on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 2 = occasionally, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most of the time, and 5 = always), different aspects of the journal and the articles in the journal. The highest average rating was 4.37 for the journal's organization. Over 90% ($n = 299$) of respondents responded favorably (always or most of the time) to the statement "the journal is organized." Approximately half (50.2%, $n = 164$) of respondents answered always while 41.0% ($n = 134$) answered most of the time. This rating scale also assessed quality of tables and figures (mean = 3.92), technicality of articles (mean = 2.23), length of articles (mean = 2.33), preferences for more "health education in practice articles" (mean = 3.79), and loss of interest while reading articles (mean = 2.44). See Table 4 for additional ratings.

Modifications

One reason for conducting this survey was to determine readers' acceptance of and preferences for converting *The Health Educator* from a print-based to an online-based format. The majority of respondents (68.8%, $n = 232$) prefer the current print-based format while 31.2% ($n = 105$) prefer conversion to an online format. Respondents were asked more specifically, if they preferred immediate conversion to an online format, if they preferred to have a transition period from print-based to online, or if they'd prefer to have both print-based and online-based formats offered. Results revealed that 55.0% ($n = 186$) of respondents would prefer to see the journal offered in both print-based and online-based formats and 21.9% ($n = 74$) of respondents would prefer to have the journal converted directly to the online format. Just

Table 2

Typical Reading Behaviors of Respondents

Typically, do you: (Choose all that apply)

Answer options	Percent	Frequency
Read the table of contents to find articles of interest?	85.1	298
Read the complete test of one or two articles?	38.6	135
Read the information inside the front cover?	27.7	97
Scan the issue and rarely read any articles?	26.9	84
Read only the abstracts?	23.7	83
Read the editor's notes?	22.3	78
Read the advertisements within the journal?	20.3	71
Read the complete test of more than two articles?	19.4	68

Table 3

Overall Assessment Ratings of Respondents

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent) Answer options	Very poor	Poor	No opinion	Good	Excellent	Mean	Frequency
What is your overall assessment of the journal?	3	12	28	207	74	4.04	324
What is your assessment of the cover's attractiveness?	11	64	65	148	38	3.42	326
What is your assessment of the quality of the content?	3	12	31	213	63	4.00	322
What is your overall assessment of the journal's appearance?	3	32	51	187	47	3.75	322
What is your overall assessment of the organization of the journal's content?	2	11	41	204	64	3.98	322

over 18% percent (18.3%, n = 62) preferred retaining the print-based journal format and only 4.7% (n = 16) preferred to have a transition from print-based to online-based formats.

In addition to asking about converting to an online format, researchers asked ESG members about the importance of having a key word search feature if the journal were converted to an online format, offering CHES and MCHES CECH, and having a journal impact factor. Sixty-three percent (n = 213) of the respondents said having a search feature to search for key words if the journal were to be converted to an online format was very important while 30.0% (n = 101) said it was important and 6.8% (n = 23) said it was of no importance.

When asked how important it is for the journal to offer CHES and MCHES CECH, 57.6% (n = 193) said it was very important, while 28.1% (n = 94) said it was important and 14.3% (n = 48) said it was of no importance. Approximately 25% (n = 82) of respondents said it was important for the journal to have a Journal Impact Factor, while 54.5% (n = 176) said it was important and 20.1% (n = 65) said it was of no importance.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate (1 = of no importance; 2 = important; 3 = very important) how important

Table 4

Journal and Article Content and Quality Ratings of Respondents

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always) Answer options	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	Mean	Frequency
The journal is organized.	3	7	19	134	164	4.37	327
The articles are too technical.	97	87	112	20	6	2.23	322
The articles are too basic.	124	100	79	16	7	2.02	326
I find the articles helpful in my work.	13	67	108	97	34	3.23	319
I would like to see more health education in practice articles.	6	23	90	121	86	3.79	326
Tables/figures are easy to read.	3	13	70	167	69	3.89	322
Data in tables/figures are clearly represented.	2	13	62	176	69	3.92	322
I lose interest when reading the articles.	45	129	120	20	9	2.44	323
The articles are too long.	62	125	109	21	6	2.33	323

it is for the journal to be indexed in ERIC, MEDLINE, CINAHL Plus, EMBASE, PsychInfo, Social Science Citation Index, Science Citation Index Expanded, and Scopus. Medline, ERIC, and CINAHL Plus received the highest average ratings with 2.40, 2.28, and 2.21 (on a 3-point scale), respectively. See Table 5 for additional results.

Discussion

The most notable limitation of the study was the response rate. There were 2,692 members in the ESG membership database who were eligible to receive the journal (S. Koper, personal communication, Sept. 2, 2011), but only 504 (18.7%) responded to the e-mail solicitation. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized across the entire membership. Results do reflect, however, the opinions of those members who elected to participate in the study.

While the vast majority of ESG members are students (88%, n = 2,372) (Susan Koper, personal communication, Sept. 2, 2011), only about a quarter (23.8%, n = 81) of survey respondents were full time students. The fact that 45.8% (n = 156) of the respondents were either students or employed at the post-secondary level may reflect overrepresentation of the university setting. Still, this is likely to reflect ESG membership. Confirmation was not possible, however, as the membership database does not gather information on employment setting (S. Koper, personal communication, September 2, 2011).

As anticipated, the results of this research confirmed many of the characteristics of conducting online readership surveys as described by Clarke (2002). While researchers were able to distribute the online survey to the entire ESG membership and members had the potential to complete the survey in just minutes, the survey resulted in a small response rate (18.7%, n = 504) as is common with online survey administration (Clarke, 2002).

It was surprising and of concern to the editorial staff that 31% of ESG members who initially responded to the e-mail solicitation did not receive the journal. Also, approximately 19% of those who did receive the journal indicated they receive the journal with interruption. Clearly, a major recommendation is that the National Office of ESG investigate why so many members are not receiving the journal or experiencing interruption in service. One possible reason may be the transiency of the student membership of ESG. Because those who did not receive the journal did not complete the survey, the researchers do not know if most were student members. Another possibility is that ESG members are paying local dues and are in the membership database, but are not paying National dues which qualifies them for receiving the publications.

With regard to the demographics of the respondents, the fact that most respondents (over 60%) were under 35 years of age might possibly be an indication that younger individuals are more comfortable with and more likely to respond to online surveys. Previous research suggested that younger, better educated, higher income respondents are the most likely to complete online surveys (Sellers, 2001). The fact that the highest percentage of respondents fell in the 18-24 age range would suggest that student members of ESG were reached through the survey and their opinions were expressed, yet only 23.8% (n = 81) of respondents were full time students. Also, the fact that over 70% of respondents indicated they had been receiving the journal for five years or less may suggest that results reflect the opinions of students and relatively new professionals.

As students and professionals alike lead busy lives, it is not surprising that most respondents indicated they read

Table 5

Indexing Preferences of Respondents

In the future, how important is it for the online journal to be indexed in the following:

Answer options	Of no importance	Important	Very important	Mean	Frequency
ERIC	37	143	122	2.28	302
MEDLINE	25	133	147	2.40	305
CINAHL Plus	49	127	110	2.21	286
EMBASE	98	135	36	1.77	269
PsychInfo	57	147	88	2.11	292
Social Science Citation Index	63	150	74	2.04	287
Science Citation Index Expanded	75	143	66	1.97	284
Scopus	101	133	39	1.77	273

the journal within a month of receiving it and 3 out of 10 indicated they read the journal within a week of receipt. As expected, most people scan the table of contents to determine which articles are of particular interest and few read the complete text of more than two articles. While the good news is that almost 40% indicated they read the entire text of at least one or two articles, over 25% indicated they scan the issue, but rarely read any articles. Receiving journals is a perk of professional membership and a service to members (Cherwin, n.d.), but there may be limited interest in actually reading the journal.

Overall, survey results indicated ESG members are satisfied with the content and quality of *The Health Educator* and few changes need to be made. Readers appear to be well satisfied with the organization of the journal, yet it may be time to revisit the cover of the journal. Of the overall assessment rating items, respondents' assessment of the cover's attractiveness had the lowest mean score (3.42 out of 5) and ratings (23% rated poor or very poor) even though 57% rated it as good or excellent. The current cover was adopted in 1992 when both the journal and the monograph underwent cover changes.

The principle modification, based on results in content and quality ratings by respondents, would be to increase the number of Health Education in Practice articles in each issue. This recommendation seems to reflect a desire for more practitioner oriented articles rather than research or literature review articles. It will be simple to solicit such articles; in fact, this current issue of the journal includes a call for Health Education in Practice manuscript submission on page 43. If more such manuscripts appear, it is possible that ratings for "I find the articles helpful in my work" may increase, as well.

Another major recommendation by readers was to offer CHES and MCHES CECH through the journal. Several other professional journals (e.g., *American Journal of Health Education, American Journal of Health Studies, Journal of School Health*) offer Category I CECH through self-study of journal articles (http://www.nchec.org/ce/procal/). In order for the journal to offer CHES and MCHES CECH, completion of a multiple event provider application to National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. (NCHEC) (http://www.nchec.org/ches_providers/cech/) would be required. Then, additional record keeping, paperwork, and correspondence with NCHEC would be required to ensure that CECH would be awarded.

Indexing the journal in MEDLINE was another recommendation. According to Pestana (2009), MEDLINE is the most frequently used database. The top three preferences for indexing for *The Health Educator* where MEDLINE, ERIC, and CINAHL Plus. The journal is already indexed in ERIC and CINAHL Plus and prior to initiating the readership survey, the Editor initiated the process of seeking to have the journal indexed in MEDLINE. Results of that application are forthcoming.

Bellanca (2008) highlighted the importance of the key word search feature as professionals are spending less time reading per article, which appears to also be true with this journal as 63% said it would be very important to have a key words search feature if the journal were converted to an online format. Databases in which the journal is indexed provide keyword searches. For example, CINAHL has employees (called indexers) look at the article's abstract and attach keywords to the article so that the article will appear when someone does a search on that topic (A. Burtis, personal communication, September 3, 2011). It is possible, however, to require authors to submit keywords with their manuscript submission to be included in the abstract to make this easier for databases like CINAHL.

Journal impact factor is another area that the editorial staff needs to research. Impact factor refers to the number of times an article is cited in articles in databases. Thomson Reuters (n.d.) developed the journal impact factor in the 1960s and began to publish *Journal Citation Reports*® in 1970 as part of the Social Science Index and *Social Science Citation Index*®. Inquiries made to a university librarian revealed that the journal may need to be available through Web of Science in order to receive a journal impact factor (A. Burtis, personal communication, September 3, 2011). Clearly, additional research on journal impact factor will be required before this recommendation might be implemented.

Researchers also were interested in learning ESG members' preferences for receiving the journal (online versus print-based). In contrast with Curtis, Weller, and Hurd's (1997) findings, results of this study revealed that participants preferred a print-based journal (68.8%) over an online format (31.2%). However, over half (55%) of the participants would like to see the journal offered in both formats, so this also may be a modification considered by the editorial staff. Determining what additional resources and manpower would be required will need to be assessed before deciding to move in this direction and such a move would require approval of the Board of Directors of ESG.

Conclusion

Overall, survey results indicated ESG members are satisfied with the content and quality of *The Health Educator* and few changes need to be made. Surveying ESG members regarding their readership habits and preferences on difference aspects of *The Health Educator* has provided insight for the editorial staff as they consider modifications and improvements that may improve quality and increase satisfaction of the readership of the journal.

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Call for Submissions

HEALTH EDUCATION IN PRACTICE PAPERS

The Health Educator editorial staff is seeking Health Education in Practice submissions.

Health Education in Practice articles should present practical applications of health education practice or creative and innovative teaching ideas.

Such articles may be for any setting or age group.

Teaching Ideas and Health Education in Practice submissions should be limited to 2,300 words with 10 or fewer references.

Please follow guidelines for manuscript preparation found at www.etasigmagamma.org/healtheducator