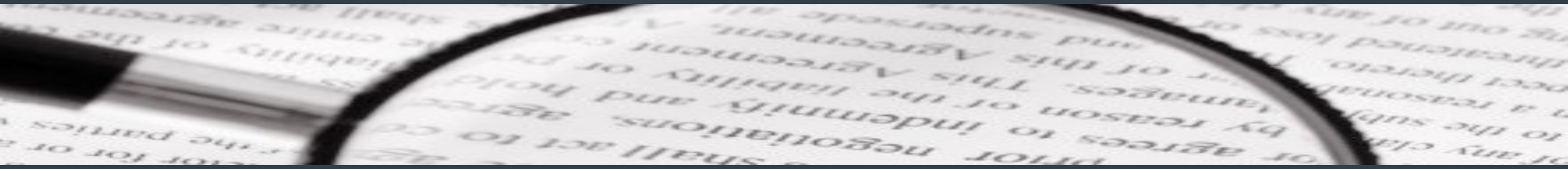
Readability Research and Best Practices for Emergency Communications



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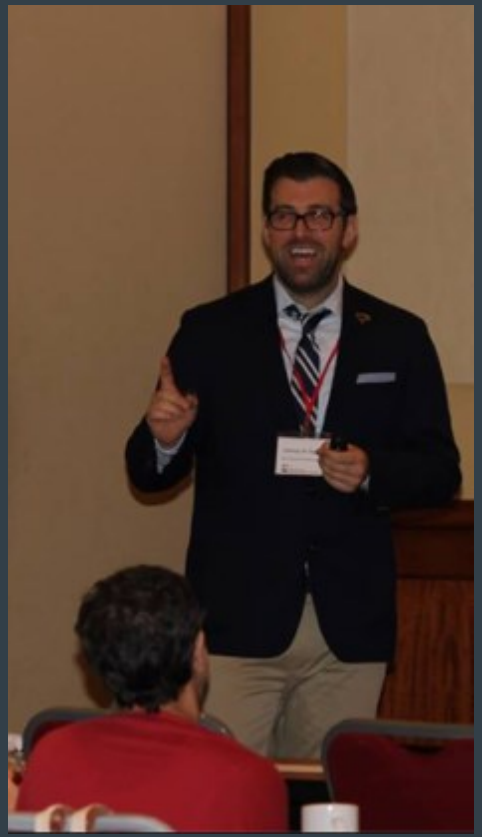
Introduction:

- Degrees in English and Education
- Pursuing PhD in Higher Education @ UT
- Background as higher education administrator, English instructor, admissions reader, research assistant
- Freelance readability consultant (free)
- Presented/published research in wide variety of conferences and presentations across US



Objectives:

- Provide a clear overview of emergency response technologies and their use.
- Explain readability hurdles in higher education communication.
- Highlight best practices.
- Offer free, digital tools for practitioners.

Definitions:

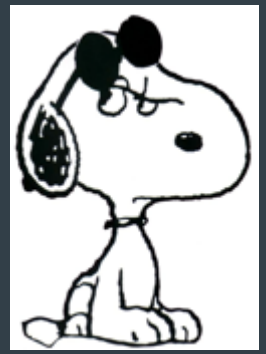
- Terms “crisis,” “emergency,” and “disaster” not the same
  - “Emergency” may be contradictory, can vary wildly depending on situation; emergencies lead to disasters; usually unanticipated; small in scale
  - “Disaster” large scale; disaster not inherently an emergency situation; can be anticipated but not controlled; single events i.e. natural disasters
  - “Crisis” can stem from disaster; unique or abnormal; disrupts an entire system i.e. Cuban Missile Crisis

Emergency Response Communication: Benefits

- Institutions of higher education (IHEs) currently using a combination of digital technologies: texting, email, social media (Connolly, 2013).
- Text messaging simultaneous, can be costly (Sheldon, 2017).
  - A colleague at a local community college pays $2.50 per student per year.
- Social media gaining most popularity
  - Relative inexpensive (Romero, 2013), popular with teenagers and college students, messages are instantaneous (Mills, Chen, Lee, & Rao, 2009), can embed pictures/videos/multimedia to better illustrate an idea (Connolly, 2013).

Emergency Response Communication: Limitations

- Not all IHEs require emergency text messaging signup (Sheldon, 2017); hackers can gather user information and send false messages/emails (Bambenek & Klus, 2008).
- Email less reliable for mobile users, stakeholders may not be near a computer to receive an email (Choney, 2010; Todd, 2013).
- Stakeholders may not perceive a threat as real; may ignore emergency response messaging altogether (Sheldon, 2017).
- No research on emergency response phone calls in higher education.



Suggestions for Practitioners:

- What if the Internet/power goes out? = have a backup plan.
- Campuses should survey stakeholders; learn which mobile technologies are most popular; learn which languages are preferred; find/friend stakeholders; mandate/incentivize signups.
- Campuses should coordinate emergency response communication.
  - Email/text/social media should be unified = send the same message
- Campuses should compose readable messages.

Readability and Higher Education

- Grade-level readability measures
  - Measures difficulty of sentence structure and word choice, produces a grade-level of reading comprehension required to read text
- Used extensively by U.S. Department of Defense
  - (Carver, 1974; Fry, 1986; Johnson, 1972; Kniffin, 1979; McClure, 1987; Sticht, 1970; Sticht & Zapf, 1976).
- Average U.S. resident = 7th-grade reading level (Clear Language Group, 2016), only 37% of high school graduates read at the 12th-grade level in the United States (National Assessment Governing Board, 2016).
- A lot of material in higher education is unreadable by its intended audience (primarily students):
  - International graduate admissions materials (Taylor, 2017a)
  - Articulation agreements (Taylor, 2017b)
  - Emergency response messaging (forthcoming, 2018)
  - Application fee waiver statements (forthcoming, 2018)
  - ADHD documentation guidelines (forthcoming, 2018)
  - Sexual assault reporting instructions (forthcoming, 2018)

Readability and Stress

- Individuals who experience stress and/or anxiety do not read and comprehend at the same level as their non-stress/anxiety peers (Rai, Loschky, & Harris, 2015).
- Individuals respond differently to stress = reading comprehension depends on difficulty and familiarity of reading task (Plieger, Felten, Diks, Tepel, Mies, & Reuter, 2017).
- Origin and duration of stress and anxiety influences cognitive function and reading comprehension (Sandi, 2013).
  - –Some acute stress in a well-rehearsed task may improve comprehension for some; long-term stress/anxiety not good.
  - –"Fight or flight" response pertains to reading but primarily during familiar, well-rehearsed tasks i.e. taking the SAT.

Suggestions for Practitioners:

- Build rapport with as many students as possible.
- Male students less likely to ask for help (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013).
- Personalize messages = humanize the experience.
- Compose short sentences.
- Use bullet points whenever possible.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms = assume unfamiliarity.
- Embed video/images to explain difficult concepts.
- Ask a current student to audit writing (UNT).

Tutorials and Tools

Auditing postsecondary communication

https://readable.io/text/

https://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp

http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

If your office uses Microsoft:

http://bit.ly/2oKQeGb

If your office really wants to get into it:

http://www.oleandersolutions.com/ReadabilityStudioFeatures.html

Using and Embedding Google Translate:

https://oed.wisc.edu/

Embedding: https://translate.google.com/manager/website/?hl=yi

Questions? And References

References