

A case study exploring facilitators' experiences of implementing a student-led Power Hour of Progress initiative within an undergraduate Psychology community

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Introduction

Power Hour of Writing (PHoW) originated at University of the West of Scotland (UWS) to support the development of academic writing by providing staff and postgraduates with protected, regular time to work on tasks within a supportive community setting. Participants plan out, work for one-hour and reflect upon their progress in each session. PHoW sessions are guided by the principle “All Progress is Progress”. Research with PHoW attendees highlights that sessions provide them with feelings of belonging, of legitimacy (in having everyday writing practices) and provide opportunities to support each other, celebrate successes, and normalise writing challenges (Zihms and Mackie, 2023). While research has shown the benefits of writing initiatives for academics and postgraduates, the benefits of “demystifying” the writing process may also be applicable to undergraduate students (Cameron et al, 2009). To test this, we set about implementing the Power Hour concept within the BSc Psychology Programme at UWS. This was not without difficulty, as we will come to see.

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Student-Staff Partnership

To achieve our aim of embedding Power Hour practices within the undergraduate community, we recruited student-facilitators via the UWS Student Associate Researcher (StAR) scheme. This programme encourages penultimate-year students to gain a minimum of two key employability skills by working with research-active staff. Three students applied to the facilitator training programme and all were accepted. This selection was underpinned by a practical need to have a minimum of two facilitators per session, and permitted flexibility across the term in terms of delivery and absence. Our rationale for involving students was underpinned by the principle that students are experts in matters that affect them, ergo, success would depend on involving students in the creation, implementation and evaluation of the initiative. We are not alone in recognising the importance of students as co-creators (Becker et al, 2015). In this regard, our partnership model is similar to the community of practice model reported by Brown et al (2018), wherein the student voice is of equal importance in the partnership.

Training

Facilitator training was based on experiential learning and reflection. Students participated in PHoW sessions and held discussions with the PHoW creator and attendees. Students then ran practice sessions and created a repository of materials including welcome slides and written support materials. Two key decisions were taken within the partnership team. First, a decision was reached to rebrand the initiative by emphasising the importance of progress in the name – hence “Power Hour of Progress” (PHoP) – indicating that all forms of academic progress, not just writing, were welcomed. Second, the decision was taken to implement the same practice of discussing goals at the start of each session, working independently for a dedicated hour, and afterwards reflecting on progress within the social setting. Ultimately, training enabled both session facilitation and follow-up support for student attendees via their repository of materials.

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Implementation

The goal of this partnership project was to examine whether, and how, PHoP sessions influenced students' approaches to learning. To test this, it was essential to set up a framework that hosted regular attendees. This was critical in providing a reliable hour of protected time, allowing attendees to make progress with cohesiveness across sessions, and in building a community of practice. Thus, investigating the impact of PHoP is ideally underpinned through regular attendance. However, we experienced challenges in creating this regular community of PHoP attendees.

Facilitators ran a total of 15 sessions. Fifteen students from four different year groups attended at least one session. Facilitators made regular efforts to advertise and implement improvements over the year and introduced various measures to encourage attendance. Posters were distributed around the university campus and shared online via UWS's Virtual Learning Environment. Student representatives were asked to advertise sessions to students. Variations of PHoP, such as "Snacks and Study" sessions were introduced, providing biscuits and coffee for those who joined. Additionally, after conducting a survey, students' preferences were accommodated by holding PHoP on different days, times and online during the spring holiday.

Method

The remainder of this case study focuses on the collaborative experiences of our facilitators as they attempted to build a framework to embed the practice of PHoP within the BSc Psychology community. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with facilitators with the aim of understanding the perceived benefits of PHoP, the challenges of implementation, and to identify best-practices for future implementation.

Analysis

Question-based thematic analysis was conducted on the facilitators' transcripts to identify:

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- (i) the benefits of PHoP for undergraduate students (including the student-facilitators)
- (ii) the challenges of implementing PHoP
- (iii) recommendations for teams wishing to introduce PHoP at their institution.

All team members completed the analysis.

Perceived Benefits

Two main benefits were evident in facilitator narratives. First, PHoP offered personal growth via skills development, and second, PHoP created and nurtured the student community. These benefits applied to both attendees and facilitators, and extended beyond the immediate academic context.

“I don't think anybody expected it to be this!”

Facilitators identified a range of benefits for PHoP attendees centring around development of effective study habits:

“it can increase productivity because you feel the peer pressure... you don't procrastinate as much.”

“learning about writing habits ourselves.”

“people can share tips or struggles [and] goals.”

These quotes speak to the ethos of PHoP, facilitating the discussion of progress and the challenges of achieving goals.

“keep them in the mentality [of]... ‘progress rather than perfection’.”

“discussing what you manage, and what you've not.”

The benefits of PHoP were not just restricted to attendees:

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“that's why these Power Hours are so beneficial, everyone involved gets a benefit out of it.”

The structure of PHoP itself is a benefit as it helps develop intentional learning habits:

“another one can be forming a habit...regularity might increase productivity...it becomes part of their schedule.”

“I've become more intentional with my studying and...learning.”

“it's made us grow as students...It's changed how we study.”

The benefits of intentional study practice developed in PHoP spill over into other areas of students' lives:

“it kind of comes alive...it does embed in further than your work life or research life.”

“it's become a very solid part of my life...my studying...my work.”

“[it's] embedded in multiple parts of my life...it just came naturally.”

Beyond this, facilitators developed additional skills from their experiences:

“we gained so many new skills...communication. Leadership skills. Collaboration. Definitely resilience.”

“personal growth-wise, I've gained...the confidence to do certain things that I wasn't sure to be able to do.”

A key theme was related to developing research-specific awareness and skills:

“a knowledge of research skills...a more practical experience within research.”

“we had to plan it...plan how to advertise it...plan how we're going to approach people...plan how we're going to...do things.”

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Facilitator development was underpinned by the challenges of embedding the initiative:

“the challenges were sort of a learning curve...more than an actual roadblock.”

“because the skills that we learned and the problem-solving aspects that we went through, led us to be able to have a great understanding.”

“knowledge that you gain through trying to work around the problems that you're facing.”

“Our campus, our community”

A second benefit of PHoP for facilitators, and attendees, was the creation of a sense of community within, and between, participants:

“Power Hour really encapsulates that university culture...we're here to study, but we're also here to make friends and have a community.”

“the sense of community can create friendships.”

“it gives you the feeling of not feeling alone. And that's important, right.”

“it does build this community both within the people that attend, but also within us as facilitators.”

PHoP offered opportunities for students from different year groups to connect:

“you get to engage with students that you wouldn't necessarily see within your class or on Teams call.”

“it's nice to engage with the younger students...we're all students, we're all in Psychology...[it] has been beneficial to chat to each other within that community.”

A peer community sharing the same interests and struggles was beneficial:

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"especially the community aspects of just meeting other psychology students in a more natural and like-minded environment."

"everybody has things to work on and everybody can feel overwhelmed and it's just like a sense of working on stuff with your peers."

Facilitators expressed a sense of belonging and ownership over the community(ies) being created:

"all these experiences were part of embedding the Power Hour in *our* community on *our* campus." (participant emphasis).

"you come to know more people and they know you...you're an active student in that sense."

"you have that community, you meet these people, you want to go back the next week, see how they're getting on with that project."

"you almost feel like you're involved with what they're doing."

Facilitators emphasised the importance of PHoP as a means of helping them create community(ies) and support new structures that did not previously exist during COVID-19's online learning:

"when I started university, it was during COVID...I don't want to say isolating, but it was more difficult to get that sense of community because you struggle to broach people when you're behind a laptop."

"I think going back to knowing that you can ask for help is very important."

Facilitators recognised their exposure to the wider academic community within their institution in addition to the diverse student communities:

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“being able to communicate with staff has opened it to...a broader aspect of community than I think we originally thought was possible.”

“you have engagement with different staff around the university...being able to communicate with them...shows that wider sense of community.”

Involvement with PHoP has also led to the facilitators involving themselves within the broader academic field via attendance at the JISC 2023 Change Agents’ Network

Conference:

“you're being active in the community, that's a huge benefit as well because you can benefit from knowing other researchers...more academics.”

“to be able to share with other people and other academics and go ‘This is what we've worked on’.”

“the networking aspects, being able to meet like-minded people and bounce their ideas off yours and see how it can be accommodated, so again it's that sense of community.”

Challenges of implementation

Facilitators identified two main challenges in implementing PHoP within the student body, including issues around building a consistent group of attendees, along with challenges of conducting real-life research.

“Not everything that we planned, happened how we planned it”

One of the main challenges was poor student attendance, which facilitators recognised as symptomatic of a broader issue:

“attendance was our main issue. That was the roadblock in the sense of what we wanted to achieve was being pushed back by the fact of getting people to attend.”

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“people weren't showing up to sometimes even their own classes.”

Facilitators identified the contradiction that students appeared interested but still did not attend:

“People were engaged and interested, but when it came to the actual moment it was getting people to come along.”

Through literature reviews, facilitators recognised one potential reason for the low attendance might be “the sticky campus challenge” (Robertson, 2018):

“students don't really stick around on campus after attending their classes.”

“especially on days that they're not already on campus, they're not coming in on extra days.”

Facilitators suggested that the broader attendance issues may partially result from learned behaviours of isolation due to COVID-19:

“[due to] COVID, a lot of students couldn't go to campuses and had to study on their own at home most of the time.”

“especially when it comes to post-COVID times where everyone's looking to attend their lecture and go home.”

There was also recognition that PHoP are voluntary, extra-curricular sessions:

“it's something that people can choose to do, but don't need to...people need to be motivated to do it themselves. No one can force them.”

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“An experience full of ups and downs”

A further challenge experienced by the facilitators relates to their growing awareness that research endeavour brings its own challenges:

“it's important to recognize that not everything goes as planned first time around.”

“it was not all amazing...we're still struggling in some aspects, but that's it, that's working on a long-term project.”

“I don't see it as a negative thing, rather a challenge that can be improved or can be worked on.”

Facilitators maintained a sense of curiosity and motivation in facing the challenges of research, alongside their recognition of this as a learning opportunity:

“This taught us so many things, we need to see this in the capacity of, OK, this is what's happened. How can we learn from this? What can we do better?”

“I believe that the negative aspect of the research has made it real because it is how research can be.”

“if we'd started with a sense of everything's perfect and nothing can go wrong, we wouldn't have learned as much as we did.”

“that initial shock of, OK, this is not gonna work out as it originally planned but doesn't therefore mean that it's bad...it is something that we've enjoyed because it involved...problem solving.”

Lessons Learnt

We now explore lessons learnt from the student-facilitator perspectives, including best-practice recommendations for those wishing to encourage PHoP practices within their student or academic body.

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First, facilitators identified the fundamental PHoP structure as important and suggested that others should adapt the PHoP in their own contexts while keeping the same ethos and structure:

“It's all about goal setting...initiating conversations, it's about that social aspect...there's nothing negative.”

“You get into the habit of ‘I've got this, I know I have this hour in this week, that I can come and just work’...it seems a lot less daunting once you've done it once.”

“It's all about progress, not finishing everything.”

Facilitators strongly argued that PHoP should continue to be student-led:

“it makes them a lot more approachable and less daunting.”

“when you have students broadcasting to students about why it's beneficial, people are more likely to listen.”

“when it's a lecturer running them, it might feel like a lecture, instead of, a study session with like-minded people.”

Advance preparation of facilitators through training and experience is critical:

“Get them involved with Power Hours beforehand.”

“it's difficult to embed a Power Hour if you don't understand the Power Hour as it is.”

Preparing session materials and running practice PHoP sessions was recommended:

“fully establish your materials and your approach towards these sessions, run mock trials.”

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“it makes the sessions run smoother and makes people want to come back because they feel like they're walking into a fully established setting in which they can learn and work.”

Speaking of the Snacks & Study initiative:

“it created that social aspect...[it] was one of the most beneficial things because it created that more community that we wanted.”

“the snacks and study sessions...was one of the most beneficial things...we implemented.”

Facilitators recognised the importance of positive personal qualities when establishing PHoP in a new community, the first being patience:

“it's the positive community and just keeping it going...if you just give it that space... that it deserves, it'll come to you!”

“not immediately drop it and give up if it doesn't go your way.”

The importance of an optimistic and creative mindset in its ability to frame the project and experiences positively was noted:

“we want to work with the positive emotions of excitement, curiosity, competence...and encourage people to come.”

“as facilitators we came together...saying...OK, let's pull this back into a more positive light and then we implemented other things.”

Overall, these interviews demonstrated that facilitators can expect to face challenges and that maintaining positivity, patience, and resilience will be useful in the long run:

“There's positive and negatives, but they're...hand in hand.”

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“it's definitely been exciting, but as I said, we're not there yet.”

“we might have had a wee dip with realizing that there are challenges in research which...was actually very beneficial to us in our careers.”

Staff Reflection

Our facilitators successfully completed the StAR scheme, gaining employability skills and becoming more intentional and informed scholars in the process. After StAR, they continued PHoP practices and are developing a suite of materials for future student facilitators (Supplementary Materials).

Evidently, PHoP offers a conducive environment for students to engage in independent intentional learning, consistent with the approach of andragogy (Merriam, 2001). We observed how PHoP benefits extended to everybody—facilitators and attendees alike—regarding making progress and finding a supportive community. Facilitators had freedom to direct PHoP, and this student-led approach encouraged ownership and a sense of pride. Through the interviews we learned how this pride infiltrated PHoP sessions themselves:

“everyone’s quite proud and we just do a wee clap afterwards [laughs] because everyone's quite chuffed with themselves.”

The sense of ownership and pride in achievements was motivating for facilitators, allowing for spillover of intentional practice into other aspects of their lives. Empowering students to make evidence-based decisions about the development of PHoP in *their* student community also encouraged the development of research literacy. A final interview question indicated that even with a magic wand, facilitators would not fix the challenges they experienced, but rather they emphasised how important these issues were for their learning. We concur and think that these challenges enabled deeper levels of control and contribution, over time shifting the balance of the partnership more towards the students as the experts (also observed by Becker et al, 2015).

We anticipate that the research literacy gained could be used to further enhance PHoP, and may trickle down to attendees as they learn from facilitators. This idea of ownership and

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motivation spilling into research literacy, and further cascading into the broader student body, is a promising area for future research. Overall, we see this as a successful student enhancement project and, like our facilitators, strongly recommend that other educators consider partnering with students to develop PHoP in their own institutions.

“Every university wants that student community that's really active, positive and helps each other. So absolutely would I recommend it for other universities.”

Funding statement

The authors received internal funding from the School of Education and Social Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland to facilitate aspects of this project, including attendance at the JISC 2023 Change Agents' Network Conference.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Dr Stephanie Zihms (co-creator of PHoW) for her support in the development of this initiative. They also appreciate the suggestions and insights from organisers and attendees of the JISC 2023 Change Agents' Network Conference.

Author Contribution Statement

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed the findings and produced the final version of the manuscript. Interviews were conducted by A. Simpson.

Supplementary Materials

To view a suite of documents created by student facilitators, for student facilitators, please visit the Open Science Framework repository available at:

https://osf.io/h6aq2/?view_only=2c402f65501d4b6c8a01f9acd957ba8f

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