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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Abstract

This case study explores the perceptions of three student-facilitators who aimed to implement an initiative delivering regular, short and structured writing sessions (Power Hour of Progress; PHoP) within the undergraduate student body. Power Hours were already established as a practice amongst staff and post-graduate students. However, Power Hour practices have not been implemented in undergraduates. Based on the previously observed benefits with staff, we anticipated Power Hour sessions would help develop study- and time-management skills and build a sense of community within the student body. A staff-student collaboration was initiated wherein three students were trained to facilitate sessions. Fifteen PHoP sessions were run, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore student-facilitator views on the attempts to embed PHoP within the student body. Question-based thematic analysis identified key challenges to implementation including poor attendance and general research challenges. However, Power Hour encourages intentional learning practices, and promotes engagement in multiple academic communities. Based on these findings, we provide best practice recommendations for anybody who wishes to encourage Power Hour practices within their academic body. We conclude with a summative staff reflection on the advantages of trusting students to take ownership over staff-student partnerships.

Keywords: Staff-Student partnership, Power Hour, Higher Education, Student development, Student co researchers

The Power Hour of Writing (PHoW) originated at the 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 outstanding tasks by bringing them together in a supportive community (Zihms & Mackie, 2023). Participants plan out, work on and reflect upon their progress in each session. Research with PHoW attendees highlighted that sessions provide them with feelings of belonging, of legitimacy in having everyday writing practices, opportunities to support each other and celebrate successes, to share everyday "frustrations" of academic life alongside tips and resources, and to normalise writing challenges (Zihms & Mackie, 2021). While research has shown the benefits of writing initiatives to academics and postgraduates, the benefits of "demystifying" the writing process may also be applicable to undergraduate students (Cameron et al., 2009). To test this idea, we designed and implemented the 'Power Hour of Progress' (PHoP) concept within the BSc Psychology Programme at UWS. This was not without difficulty, as we will come to see.

During PHoP sessions, students are encouraged to make progress on any kind of academic activity. Trained student-facilitators guide the session, helping attendees set goals for the hour-long work session. Following this, facilitators and students discuss their progress. Facilitators provide additional support, drawing on their own experiences and referencing back to a body of support materials. This case study focuses on the experiences of three PHoP student-facilitators. In this study, we sought to understand the benefits of PHoP, the challenges of implementation, and identify best-practices from the facilitators' perspectives.

Over academic year 2022-2023 three female students were trained to facilitate Power Hour (PH) sessions. Training started with experiences to develop an understanding of what PH is and how the community behind it has been built. They therefore attended as participants in PHoW sessions hosted by the creator of the PH concept at UWS (Dr Stephanie Zihms). Discussions were then held with the team and Dr Zihms to consider how to embed these community aspects into sessions for undergraduate students to ensure they created the same protected, flexible space integral to the PH concept. Next, student-facilitators ran practice PHoP sessions and, through an ongoing reflective process, created a repository of materials including welcome slides, scripts and writing support materials.

Completion of training allowed for independent PHs to be scheduled. Dubbed the 'Power Hour of Progress', the title emphasises any activity contributing to academic progress is welcome. The goal of this research project was to examine whether and how these sessions influenced students' approaches to learning. To test the effectiveness of PHoP, 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 PH is ideally underpinned through regular attendance. However, there have been challenges in creating this regular community of PHoP attendees.

Student-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. Various measures were introduced 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

After the academic year ended, individual interviews were conducted with facilitators to examine their experiences of the collaborative attempts to build a framework to embed the practice of PH within the BSc Psychology cohort. Semi-structured interviews provided insight into the facilitators' experiences and perceptions of the success and challenges of the initiative, and further development of the PHoP framework.

Analysis

Question-based thematic analysis was completed on the facilitators' transcripts to identify (i) the benefits of PH for undergraduate students (including the student-facilitators), (ii) the challenges of implementing PH, and (iii) recommendations for teams wishing to introduce PH at their institution. All team members completed the analysis.

Perceived Benefits

Two main benefits were evident in the narratives. First, PH offers personal growth via skills development, and second, PH creates and nurtures the student community. Facilitators identified 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 PH 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, they can share their goals."

These quotes speak to the ethos of PH, that it facilitates 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."

Facilitators recognised the benefits of PH were not restricted to just attendees.

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

They identified that the structure of PH 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 my learning."

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

The benefits of intentional study practice learned in PH may spillover into other areas of student's lives.

"... it kind of comes alive and ... 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 a lot. I've gained the confidence to do certain things that I wasn't sure to be able to do."

A key theme of this discussion related to developing research-specific awareness and skills.

"...a knowledge of research skills but a more practical experience within research skills."

"...we had to plan it...plan how to advertise it...plan how we're going to approach people...plan how we're going to actually do things."

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

"...the actual 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."

"...real-life skills...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 by extension PHoP attendees, is the creation of a sense of community within and between those who attend.

"...Power Hour to me 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."

PH offered opportunities for students from different year groups to come together.

"...you get to engage with students that you wouldn't necessarily see within your class or on your teams call."

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

Having a peer community who share the same interests and struggles was also a benefit.

"...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*).

"...that 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 PH as a means of helping them create community(ies) and support structures that had not previously existed for them during COVID-19-related emergency remote online learning.

"...when I started university, it was during the times of 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 actually ask for help is very important."

In addition to the diverse student communities, facilitators recognised their exposure to the wider academic community within their institution.

"...being able to communicate with staff has opened it to such 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 it shows that that wider sense of community."

Involvement with PH 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, knowing 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. These included 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 the sessions."

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

Facilitators also picked up on the contradiction that students appeared interested but still did not attend PH sessions.

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

Through literature reviews, facilitators recognised that 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 at all."

Facilitators suggested that the broader attendance issues may, in part, 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 during that period."

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

There was also recognition that PHs 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."

"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."

Relatedly, one of the most striking aspects of the interviews was how 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...but it is something that we've enjoyed because it involved...problem solving."

Lessons Learnt

We now explore lessons learnt from the student-facilitator and staff perspectives, including best-practice recommendations for anybody who wishes to encourage PH practices within their student or academic body. First and foremost, facilitators identified the fundamental PH structure as important and suggested that others should adapt the PH in their own contexts while keeping the ethos and structure unchanged.

"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 PHs 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 also 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."

Facilitators also recommend preparing session materials and running practice PHoP sessions.

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

"...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 sort of snacks and study sessions...that was one of the most beneficial things that 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."

They also noted the importance of an optimistic and creative mindset and how it is essential to frame the project and experiences positively.

"...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."

"...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

PHoP offers a conducive environment for students to engage in independent intentional learning, which is consistent with the approach of andragogy (Merriam, 2001). We observed how the benefits of PHoP extended to everybody—facilitators and attendees alike—in terms of making progress and finding a supportive community. Facilitators were given the freedom to direct PHoP, and this student-led approach encouraged ownership and a sense of pride. Through the interview process 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 student-facilitators, and it allowed 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 encourages the development of research literacy. A final question to facilitators indicated that even with a magic wand, they would not fix the challenges they experienced, but rather they emphasised how important these issues were for their learning. We think this illustrates their motivation for developing PHoP and *their* community.

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

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 draft manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed the findings and approved the final version of the manuscript. Interviews were conducted by A. Simpson.

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