

Blurring the (academic) boundaries: bringing staff and research students together in an online writing community

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Academic writing is a key task for university staff and postgraduate research students (PGRs) but often it takes place in isolation, outside working hours. Initiatives do exist to make academic writing a social activity but they tend to focus on peer groups, whether staff or students, who are working towards specific outputs. The Power Hour Of Writing (PHOW) is a short period of protected time during the working day which brings staff and PGRs together in a supportive, online group covering all aspects of the writing process. Research into the PHOW identified three key themes: developing a community of university staff – both academics and professional services – and PGR students; promoting the legitimacy of writing as academic work; and creating accountability to prioritise writing and writing-related practices. In addition to exploring the research in more detail, this presentation will also incorporate a short Power Hour taster session for delegates.

Full paper

The challenges around academic writing for university staff and postgraduate research students (PGRs) are well documented: lack of time; pressure from teaching and research commitments; feeling isolated, a situation exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns (Leal Filho *et al*, 2021; Wilson, 2019; Dobeles and Veer,

2018; Murray, 2015). Potential solutions also exist: writing retreats (in-house or residential), workshops, writing centres and peer support groups organised institutionally or by individuals (Namakula and Prozesky, 2019; Benvenuti, 2017; Penney *et al*, 2015; Lee and Murray, 2013; Lee and Boud, 2003). However, this support tends to focus on outputs (journal articles, PhD theses, books) and groups are often separated into staff and students (Cahusac de Caux *et al*, 2017; Devlin and Radloff, 2012). The Power Hour Of Writing (PHOW) aims to build a supportive and inclusive environment for both staff and PGRs, enabling them to protect time for writing, build sustainable habits and gain confidence through all stages of the writing process, not just completing the final output.

The PHOW started in August 2019 as face-to-face sessions in a multi-campus, post-92 university in Scotland, co-facilitated by colleagues from the institution's academic development team. It aimed to promote academic writing as a social activity in group spaces while jointly supporting staff and PGR students. Uptake was initially slow, but with the onset of Covid-19 the PHOW moved onto Microsoft Teams during the sector-wide pivot to online teaching, learning and support (Nordmann *et al*, 2020) and attendance at sessions began to increase. Each PHOW starts with check-in and goal-setting; cameras and microphones are then switched off for an hour to allow for focused work time and the session ends with a follow-up conversation via camera or the chatbox. This feedback encourages participants to share information, links and support, contributing to the development of a community centred around academic writing (Voegele and Stevens, 2017) that combines the perspectives of staff – both academic and professional services – and PGR students.

Research into the online Power Hour began in April 2020 using a mixed methods approach combining analysis of participant numbers along with qualitative surveys drawn from three different time points. Three research questions focused on participants' feelings about their experience of academic writing, their reasons for attending the PHOW and the impact (if any) which the Power Hour had. An opportunistic sampling strategy was adopted (Onwuegbuzie

and Leech, 2007) with participants completing a survey after their first session, a follow-up six to eight months later and a third questionnaire, focusing on future plans, sent around a year after the Power Hour moved online.

Built-in Microsoft Teams analytics allowed evaluation of the team's growth and members' engagement, revealing that around one-third of the 101 individual participants attended a PHOW only once. Of those who came more frequently, however, 46% attended between two and 10 sessions; 18% came to between 11 and 30 PHOWs; and 2% attended between 31 and 50 of the 78 sessions offered during the time frame under consideration. Further research is planned to explore the reasons why 34% of participants attended only one session.

The qualitative surveys were coded separately using Nvivo before cross-survey analysis was utilised to see if themes had changed or new themes had been identified. Three key themes emerged around participation in the PHOW: community, legitimacy and accountability.

Community highlighted the importance of seeing academic writing as a shared, social experience (Murray, 2015). The informal sharing of resources and information, first by the facilitators and then by the participants, was also identified as contributing to the growth of a PHOW community. Legitimacy meant the ability to engage with academic writing projects during standard working hours (Sword, 2017), allowing participants to protect their time and build sustainable writing habits. Accountability encouraged participants to focus on their goal for the session (Jensen, 2017); even if they did not achieve their initial aims, they reported that feeding back to the supportive environment of the PHOW helped them to stay motivated.

Using matrix analysis, PGR students indicated that the sense of community was most important for their decision to attend; staff, both academic and professional services, identified legitimacy as an important factor, as well as community. Although accountability remained important to both groups, it did not have the same impact as the other two key themes.

The research indicates the value of a supportive online community which embeds academic writing into the working lives of university staff and PGR students. The PHOW continues to develop and further research is ongoing.

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