The Power Hour of Writing: An Empirical Evaluation of our Online Writing Community

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Abstract

The "Power Hour of Writing" is an institution-led approach which brings together staff and postgraduate research students in a community that encourages participants to write regularly as part of their academic practice, helping to develop sustainable habits. This research into the "Power Hour of Writing" combines analysis of participant numbers with qualitative analysis of free text responses from online surveys taken at three different time points. Three themes emerged and were evident across all three surveys, independent of their time point: The importance of community; making writing a legitimate part of people's everyday work; and accountability, which is built into the structure of the "Power Hour Of Writing". Our research indicates that regular, short timeslots for writing can have a valuable impact on staff and postgraduate researchers. Not only did this intervention help build the community at a time while people were working even more in isolation due to the pandemic, but it also highlighted to participants that protecting time for writing benefits their work.

Introduction

Academic writing is a key aspect of professional practice for staff and postgraduate researchers (PGRs) at universities; interestingly, much writing tends to happen while the writer is working alone, often outwith standard working hours, due to competing demands on their time (Dobele & Veer, 2018). Therefore, many writers are engaging with the writing process unsupported, which can lead to a decrease in writing confidence and overall enjoyment of writing (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018; Namakula & Prozesky, 2019). Considering that writing is such an important part of academic life, it is arguably a shared goal to ensure that staff and students are supported across all stages of the writing and research process.

The "Power Hour of Writing" (PHOW) is an example of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that aims to meet this goal by emulating the writing experience in a community setting for academic writing. Our previous research shows that participants value the accountability and support to protect time for their writing, as well as the community this formed while participants were working remotely in isolation (Zihms & Mackie, 2020). The institutional-led PHOW approach aims to encourage participants to write regularly by making it part of their academic practice and developing sustainable habits. We do acknowledge that there are benefits to all models of writing support, such as residential retreats, Shut Up And Write groups and peer-led support sessions, but we want to add an alternative approach which focuses on creating a long-term community of writers, for both staff and postgraduate research students, based on a support method which could be embedded into the working day to help people build confidence in their academic writing. To demonstrate this, in 2019 we established the PHOW at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) to provide short, regular slots of protected time for writing while building a supportive and inclusive (online) environment for staff and PGRs. This time is free of learning pressures and has no agenda; it is simply there to provide staff and PGRs with time in their calendars for writing and writing-related activities. Here we outline the concept of the PHOW and explore the research which has investigated its value for supporting

writing development. PGR participants particularly valued the sense of community around the online sessions, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, which had seen them working from home, separated from their colleagues and institutional support system. Staff, however, valued not just the community, but also the sense of protected time during the working day, which enabled them to focus on writing-related projects.

The PHOW runs regularly throughout the year, and participants can use the time for all aspects of their research since we consider the entirety of the writing process, not just publication. As such, The main aim of the PHOW is to to enable staff and PGRs to protect time, build sustainable habits and gain confidence in doing so. This helps minimise barriers to academic writing by supporting staff and PGRs through the writing process in its entirety. PGRs and early career researchers can be left to explore the writing process on their own and their experience of writing may clash with their expectations. This is often because the majority of the writing process is hidden and only the end product—a thesis, journal paper or book—is seen (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017). The PHOW acts as a writing community where all aspects of writing are shared amongst the group. This makes this set-up unique as most writing groups and retreats focus on publishing outputs and supporting researchers towards the end of the writing i.e., writing up their work (Benvenuti, 2017; Devlin & Radloff, 2012; Penney, 2015; Voegele & Stevens, 2017). The purpose of this study is to better understand staff and PGRs' perceptions of academic writing, why they attend the PHOW, why they continue to attend or not, as well as exploring the wider impact of the PHOW regarding community and belonging. Overall, the results from our analysis of the first year of online PHOW sessions indicate that this approach will remain relevant for future working environments. To arrive at this finding, our study was guided by three overarching research questions:

(1) How do people feel about (their) academic writing?
(2) Why do people attend the Power Hour?
(3) What impact does the Power Hour have?

A review of existing literature, as well as exploring writing communities on Twitter, Facebook and online, revealed that a wide variety of academic writing support is available from retreats, workshops, seminars, and webinars organised both by institutions and individuals. Although the popularity of these varied forms of writing provision shows the importance of academic writing support, we found little ongoing support beyond these one-off events or groups focused on publication outputs. Groups, retreats, and programmes organised by institutions tend to be focused on increasing publication outputs from academics. They are also often separated into staff-focused and student-focused groups (Aitchison, 2009; Benvenuti, 2017; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Cameron et al., 2009; Devet, 2018; Devlin & Radloff, 2012; Feldon et al., 2017; James, 2018; Kahn et al., Lee & Boud, 2003; Lee & Murray, 2013; Murray, 2015; Penney et al., 2015; Voegele & Stevens, 2017; Wardale et al., 2015; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018; Wilson, 2019; 2016). Recognising the varied nature of writing supports and research on such support, the following section offers a brief contextualisation, detailing the PHOW and relating it to similar supports in writing provision.

The Power Hour of Writing

PHOW started in the summer of 2019 as an on-campus activity trying to promote academic writing as a social activity in group spaces (Murray, 2015). The aim was to increase the visibility of academic writing by encouraging people to write together in the campus cafés. As UWS is a multi-campus institution, we added an online component to support off campus writers. Overall, uptake was slow. We had one or two members of staff joining us occasionally but many times we were writing by ourselves. However, informal feedback showed that participants really appreciated the time and support, even if they did not always attend in person.

In response to the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 and with support from an Advance HE Good Practice grant, we moved the PHOW fully online in April 2020, using Microsoft Teams. This was part of our team's response to the sector-wide pivot to online learning, teaching and

support (Nordmann et al., 2020). Again, uptake was slow initially, this time likely owing to the challenging situations that colleagues faced personally and professionally amid the pandemic, when, for example, colleagues were adjusting to working and teaching from home. Gradually, however, more people started to join the online sessions.

The Power Hour of Writing Format

The structure of the PHOW is based on concepts found in learning communities and action learning (Lee & Boud, 2003; Parker, 2009). Initial goal setting allows for accountability, and helps participants to focus on the task they set for that session (Jensen, 2017). A follow-up gives time for reflection, where participants can share ideas, tips, and resources. The follow-up is also an opportunity to provide or receive feedback (Parker, 2009). We decided on 60 minutes of focus time, as this is long enough to get into a focus state but short enough to ensure it can be integrated into a daily practice. Therefore, each PHOW is scheduled for 80 minutes and comprises three official elements: Check-in, focused work time, and follow-up, as Figure 1 demonstrates.
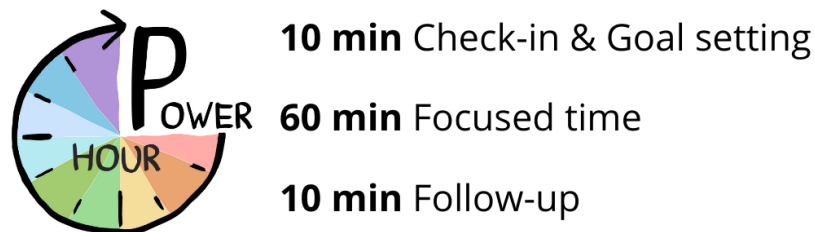

Figure 1. Power Hour of Writing format

We use the 10 minutes of check-in to chat with participants and explain the format to first-timers, while colleagues share their goals for the session via the chat-box. This is followed by 60 minutes of focused time to work towards the goals set by the participants. Cameras are switched off and everyone is on mute. The host shares a PowerPoint slide, as seen in Figure 2, explaining that everyone is writing. The host also monitors the chat-box and encourages late joiners to share their goals, and to ensure that they are muted and that their cameras are off.

Figure 2. Example Power Point slide from Power Hour of Writing

After the 60 minutes of focused time, participants return to the meeting for a verbal follow-up. This is a chance for everyone to share how they got on with their chosen task, ask questions, and share tips and resources. The host guides this section of the discussion. We understand that not everyone wants to or can join in verbally or with their camera turned on, so we encourage people to follow up in the chat-box to ensure everyone can engage.

Data and Methods

The research followed a mixed-methods approach combining analysis of participant numbers for PHOW sessions using Microsoft Teams Analytics with qualitative analysis of surveys from three time points. This project has been approved by the UWS School of Education and Social Sciences Ethics committee (project number 7202). Due to our multi-campus organisation, we established an Academic Writing Team (AcWri) on Microsoft Teams in 2019; since April 2020, we have hosted the online PHOW sessions in a dedicated channel within this team. Built-in analytics from the Microsoft Teams App allow us to evaluate the growth of the team and assess members' engagement. For this research project, the analytics allowed us to extract information for each PHOW session using attendance records.

We adopted an opportunistic sampling strategy within the population of participants who attended the PHOW via Microsoft Teams (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Participants received an information sheet and had to give consent before filling in any of the surveys via Microsoft Forms. We invited participants to complete a survey after attending their first session; they were then asked to complete a follow-up survey between six to eight months after the PHOW moved online in April 2020. After approximately 11 to 12 months of online PHOW sessions, we asked participants to complete a forward planning survey. This research design is depicted in Figure 3 and the survey questions are included in Appendix A.
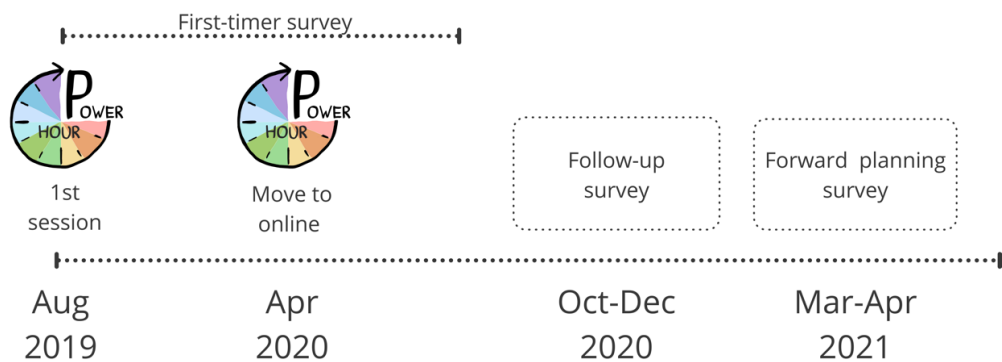

Figure 3. Power Hour of Writing survey research design

The surveys received different response rates, as demonstrated in Table 1. Notably, due to the set-up of the group and the surveys, we cannot link responses from individuals across all three surveys. However, a communal response analysis has been possible:

Table 1. Survey types and correlating response

Survey	Responses
First-timer survey	29
Follow-up	26
Forward planning	20

Qualitative content analysis (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) was used to interpret the responses to the survey. This paper works from the premise that any approach that uses a qualitative content analysis should be guided by the following six steps: Formulation of research question; selection of samples to be analysed; definition of categories to be analysed; outline and implementation of coding process; trustworthiness of coding; and analysis of the results of the coding process (Gibson et al., 2021; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Each survey had open-ended and closed questions and collected some demographic characteristics for each participant, e.g., staff or student status—see the appendix for more details on the survey. After initial coding by hand, all survey responses were uploaded to NVivo (*NVivo (Version 12)*) for more detailed coding of open-ended questions and to undertake matrix coding against participant characteristics. Each survey was coded separately before allowing cross-survey analysis to see if themes changed over the timeline of the surveys or if new themes emerged. At each stage of the qualitative content analysis, the individual codes and categories were re-examined to confirm that they accurately captured the responses of the survey in relation to the research questions. The lead author carried out this coding independently until there were no further codes or categories found to be emerging from the data; i.e., until descriptive saturation had been reached (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). The codes and coding stages were then checked by the second author as a form of consensus-based inter-rater reliability (Stemler, 2004).

Results

The results of the study reflect on the analysis of Microsoft Teams and the survey data, offering perspectives on community, legitimacy and accountability and writing confidence in the PHOW.

Microsoft Teams Analysis
Since the PHOW moved online, we observed an increase in participants from one or two participants on campus to five to ten online. We also noticed fluctuations in line with the academic calendar, e.g., annual leave or start of teaching, as demonstrated in

Figure *1*. From April 2020 to March 2021, we hosted 78 PHOW sessions with a total attendance of 680; an average attendance of 8.7 participants per session.
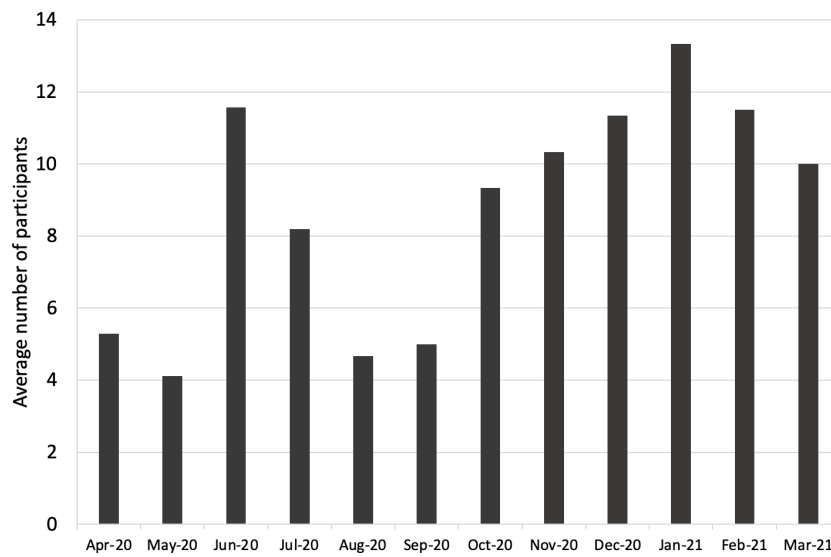
Figure 1. Average number of participants per month since the Power Hour of Writing moved online

The 680 attendances were made by 101 individuals; however, around one third of participants (34) only attended one session. This means that 67 individuals made 646 attendances of two or more sessions. Removing one-time attendances reduces the average attendance per session to 8.2 participants. Out of the 67 individuals, 46% attended between two and 10 sessions, 18% between 21 and 40 sessions and 2% attended between 31 and 50 sessions of the 78 sessions offered in the time frame discussed in this paper, as shown in
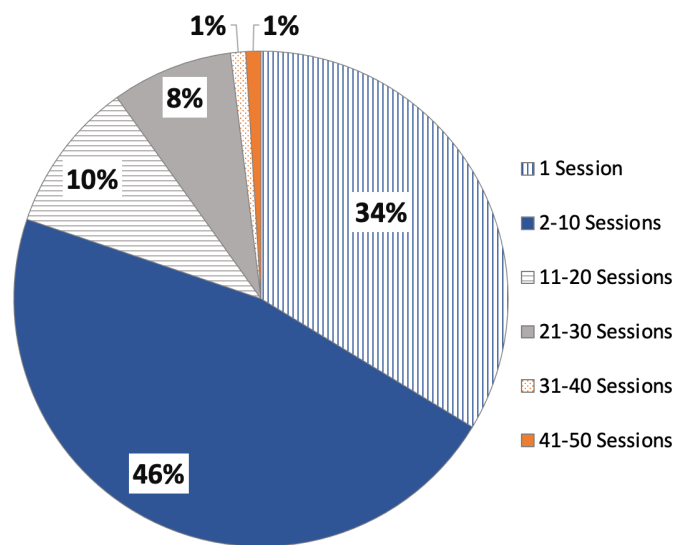
Figure *2*.

Figure 2. Breakdown of the number of sessions participants attended over the first year of the Power Hour of Writing out of a total of 78 sessions

Survey analysis

Three key themes emerged around attendance at the PHOW which were evident across all surveys, independent of their time point: Community, legitimacy, and accountability. However, the key theme changed slightly over time, with writing legitimacy being more dominant at the first time point and community at the third time point. Matrix analysis shows that overall, a sense of community was more important for PGRs attending the sessions, whereas staff gave community paired with legitimacy as their main reasons for attending. Accountability was also important, but it did not have the strength of the other two key themes. These themes will now be discussed in greater depth. The survey results also highlighted a range of barriers that limit engagement with the PHOW; however, this is part of a follow up project and as such, will not be discussed here.

Community

Writing as a social practice has been studied and reported on in a range of areas and it is one of the main aspects of writing retreats, writing groups and other peer settings (Murray, 2015). Knowing that other people were writing at the same time brought a sense of community and shared experience to participants in the PHOW:

> Didn't realise that writing and sharing it with others would help me to
> improve. Always regarded it as a solitary experience only to be shared with
> an assessor. [PGR]

In addition to writing with others at the same time, albeit with the cameras off and microphones muted, being part of the community helped participants to protect this time for writing. They also highlighted the relaxed and supportive atmosphere at the PHOW sessions, signalling that without pressures to "produce" a certain output, such as word counts, during this time, they felt freed to focus on their own goals. The informal sharing of resources and tips as part of the follow-up conversations was also identified as a source of support; this aspect of the community emerged as the facilitators first started to share resources and participants followed, contributing information from their own knowledge and experience. This evolution from observer to active participants is a key aspect in social learning settings and we identify this behaviour in many of the PHOW participants. For example, participants would often start by commenting only on their work; however, over time they became more confident to share more perspectives on each other's work and practices, often via the chat function in Microsoft Teams. This then adds to the resources available, since the chat stays available to all members of the

AcWri Team, even if they did not attend that particular sessions, creating a sense of sustained community (Aitchison, 2010; Deri, 2022; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lee & Boud, 2003; Parker, 2009). Evidently, as most staff and PGRs were still working from home amid the pandemic at the point in which this study was conducted, the PHOW also added a sense of belonging, and the community aspect has become even more important (Kotera et al., 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2021).

Legitimacy

Participants identified that the PHOW gave them legitimacy to continue with their academic writing projects during standard working hours (Sword, 2017). Viewing the meeting in their calendars empowered them to protect this time for writing-related activities:

> … already I feel I am paying much more attention to my writing. More
> importantly, I am building in the time for this which I have not previously
> done because everything else takes over. [Staff]

It seems that the timing of the sessions did not matter as much as having the time scheduled in participants' online calendars. Having this focused time offered by a centralised academic support team also helped participants to protect the sessions:

> …I keep telling myself, right you're going to write tomorrow and then end up putting it
> off. So having someone else decide when I'm writing and having it in the calendar really
> helped. [Staff]

This sits well with the goal of the PHOW sessions to enable staff and PGRs to protect time, build sustainable writing habits and gain confidence in doing so. Writing often happens in isolation; without giving it the recognition it deserves, it can be difficult to keep up with writing goals while dealing with competing tasks. We also found that over time participants built confidence and shared how they were protecting time for their research.

Accountability and writing confidence

Accountability for writing groups is important as it helps participants to focus and allows for a more productive session (Jensen, 2017)**.** Having participants set their goals, then checking up afterwards on their progress in a supportive environment, helped them to stay motivated even if they did not always achieve their initial aims:

> After my first session, I can say I really enjoyed it, having
> that accountability of expressing my goal and then following up
> with everyone on my progress, fantastic motivation! [PGR]

Having to follow up verbally about progress made during the PHOW helped participants to focus on their writing (or other chosen tasks) for the 60 minutes. In addition, it decreases the impact of common distractions such as email, and the short timeslot means participants can easily fit the PHOW into their normal workday. When compared to retreats or longer periods of writing group work, this is a clear advantage of PHOW. Accountability is an important part of learning communities and helps build peer support over time (Parker, 2009). Having the accountability section visible helps participants to stay focused or come back to their focus if they were distracted. This aspect of the PHOW also provides the opportunity to set the scene for a supportive environment, since we focus on progress and not perfection.

Even though the PHOW sessions do not give writing instructions and participants can choose what they are working on, including non-writing tasks, like marking or data analysis, several participants reported that attending these sessions increased their confidence and skills in academic writing. They attributed this to peer-learning, as well as better understanding how others are approaching writing and writing-related tasks. Overall, the PHOW sessions became more than just a writing group. The regular time slot, hosted sessions, and the relaxed

atmosphere encouraged most participants to return and make the PHOW part of their working routine.

Conclusion

Our research shows that regular, short timeslots for writing and writing-related tasks can have a valuable impact on staff and PGRs' writing practices. Based on the survey analysis, we conclude that participants started to attend the PHOW sessions for their writing or research activity, in particular during a time of isolation from work and peers. The follow-up and forward planning responses show that the community that formed during that time encouraged participants to come back to the sessions. PGRs, early career staff and staff new to research were supported as they encountered academic writing through the PHOW sessions, some for the first time, as well as other research related activities. Over time, this type of intervention helped build a supportive community where staff and PGRs could learn from each other. This has been particularly important while people were working in isolation due to the pandemic. For staff, this type of writing support also highlighted how formally protecting writing time benefits their work overall.

The PHOW format and online hosting allows participants to move from observers to active members over time (Deri, 2022; Lave & Wenger, 1991), while the shared experience of writing with others allows participants to become part of a writing community, as well as the wider university community. We are aware that this type of writing support and community is not for everyone; however, it is a valuable format to consider, especially since the PHOW community has developed into a supportive environment where people feel safe to share a wide range of work-related challenges and celebrate successes. Opening the group to staff and PGRs has encouraged knowledge exchange between these groups and provides an insight into academic life which PGRs may not normally experience.

We highly encourage other institutions to consider introducing PHOW sessions (or amended versions) into their academic writing support to empower staff and PGRs to give writing the time and focus it deserves while building a supportive community. Not only did the PHOW community exceed our expectations, but we are proud to be part of this community and have benefited from the peer-support as much as the participants.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Survey questions
Power Hour of writing: First time survey

1. I have read and understand the participants information
a. YES
b. NO
2. I am happy to continue with the survey
a. YES
b. NO
3. Please complete the BASE test (http://writersdiet.com/base.php) and enter your scores below

	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
Behavioural habits					
Artisanal habits					
Social habits					
Emotional habits					

4. Do you track your writing?
a. YES
b. NO
5. How do you track your writing? (if Q5 Yes)
a. TEXT:
6. Why don't you track your writing? (if Q5 No)
a. Text:
7. Why did you decide to attend a Power Hour of Writing session?
a. TEXT:
8. How did you join this first session?
a. In Person
b. Remotely
9. I say 'Academic writing' you say:
a. TEXT:
10. I identify as:
a. TEXT
11. My age is:
12. I work/study at UWS
a. YES
b. No
13. My main campus is (if Q12 yes)
a. Ayr
b. Dumfries
c. Lanarkshire
d. London
e. Paisley
f. other
14. I am a (if Q12 yes)
a. PGR

b.   Member of Staff
c.   other
15. I work/study at: (if Q12 No)
16. I am a / I work as a (if Q12 No)
17. Any other comments:

Power Hour of Writing: Follow-up survey
1.   I have read and understand the participation information

Yes
No

2.   I agree to take part in the survey and understand that I cannot withdraw my responses once I submit.

Yes
No

3.   Have you taken part in any of the UWS Academy AcWri Power Hour of Writing sessions organised by UWS Academy?

Yes
No

4.   How did you join the UWS Academy AcWri Power Hour of Writing sessions:

Computer / Laptop
Mobile device (phone / tablet)

5.   How many Power Hour of Writing sessions did you attend:

1
2
3
4
5
>5

6.   What stopped you from attending a Power Hour of Writing session?

7.   What do you like best about the Power Hour of Writing sessions?

8.   What could we do better regarding the Power Hour of Writing sessions?

9.   How else could we support your academic writing?

10. Anything else?

Power Hour of Writing: Forward planning survey
1.   I have read and understand the participation information

Yes

No

2. I agree to take part in the survey and understand that I cannot withdraw my responses once I submit.

Yes
No

3. Why do you join the Power Hour of Writing sessions?

4. How many Power Hour of Writing sessions do you attend on average per month (we count the Power Day as 1 session):

1-2
3-4
5-6
6-7
all 8

5. What tends to stop you from attending a Power Hour of Writing session?

6. What do you like best about the Power Hour of Writing sessions?

7. How has the Power Hour of Writing supported you?

8. Anything else you would like to share regarding the Power Hour of Writing?