

## **Establishing faculty-based peer-led Pomodoro® online study communities**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The University of Nottingham Libraries' Learning Development (Academic Skills) team started hosting 'Study With Us' (online study community utilising the Pomodoro® Technique) sessions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to provide an online community and a connection to the University for students during lockdown periods. Post-pandemic, these sessions continue to be hosted once a week during term time with an average attendance of 12 (minimum 4, maximum 23, between October 2022 and January 2023). There has been a demand for an increase in the frequency of the sessions from the existing participants. The team have limited resources and would struggle to host any additional sessions on a regular basis.

Following some initial research with the current 'Study With Us' community to discern the actual requirements for additional sessions, there was some demand for faculty-specific sessions to be hosted. Therefore, we teamed up with the Faculty of Engineering to work with their peer mentors to establish the efficacy of running a regular peer-led Pomodoro® online study community specifically for engineering students with the aim of establishing if this model was suitable to be rolled out across all five faculties and hence cater for the increase in demand for the study sessions. The aim of the session is to share: the research so far; an evaluation of the process of setting up the initiative with the faculties and the peer mentors; some initial analysis of the experiences of the session participants to establish the success, demand for and future direction of 'Study With Us' at the University.

**Keywords:** student-led; Pomodoro®; study groups.

## ***Community response***

The session afforded opportunity for participants to reflect on their own institutions and practice:

We have been toying with the idea of online 'shut up and write' style study sessions led by our library volunteers, so I was particularly interested in Amy's talk. The lack of attendance when Amy's team tried this online has confirmed my worst fears of these however - though it was heartening to see that the in-person sessions worked better.

Given the context of this scheme, questions were raised around Halls of Residence as a host and how this impacted uptake on the scheme:

I wonder if the relatively rare set up in Nottingham with on-campus Halls of Residence slightly set apart from the main academic area of campus and with their own communities and identities was a factor in their success? I have been trying to work out whether if we did something in the shared areas of our accommodation blocks (which are more like apartment blocks than Halls), as well as in the library in the centre of campus, they could reach more people? An interesting thought that I may look into further.

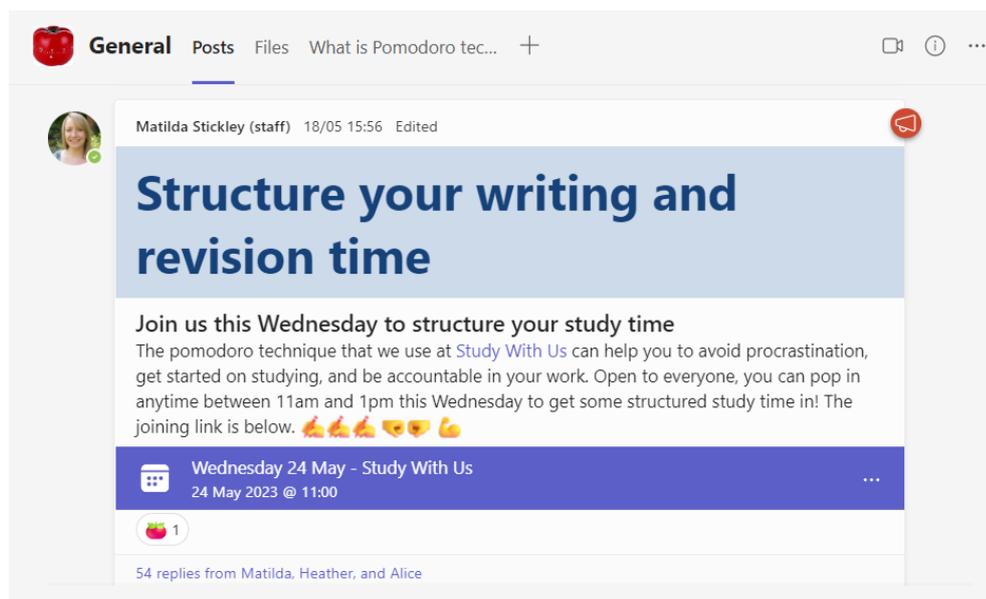
There were also reflections on how such study sessions are reflected in social media and the possibility of using these as a resource to facilitate such online 'Study With Me' sessions:

What I found particularly fascinating was in the questions at the end which revealed TikTok stars that run similar online study sessions, and which are incredibly popular. Maybe we should just point students to these? We cannot recreate the coolness (am I showing my age even using that word?) that the TikTok option has and students will still be getting what they clearly feel they need.

## Editorial comment

The Pomodoro® online study communities are a really good example of an initiative to support learning during Covid-19 lockdowns. These sessions were advertised and run through Microsoft Teams (see Figure 1) for the benefit of students that needed structure and accountability in their studies.

**Figure 1. Advert for ‘Structure your writing and revision time’.**



There is no better way to show the impact of these sessions - and a clear demonstration of demand - than the words of the students that have benefited from them:

I think it is really brilliant and helped me a lot during my first year of my PhD (which was also the pandemic lockdowns) - thank you for running these sessions!

Please, please, please can we have more. I have never been this efficient in my life! I started doing this during Covid and I have found it useful to keep motivated since then. I do the time to write sessions with the researcher academy too but prefer these as they are more social so it makes doing a PhD feel less lonely.

Post-pandemic it was great to see the progress made on taking this initiative further – from something to build community in lockdown towards a longer-term mechanism for study support. The honesty in the presentation was really valuable, as it took us through the original plan of sessions run via the Faculty of Engineering Peer Mentor programme, using students to support sessions. From 19 sign-ups, it was a shame to see only two students

attended the training sessions and that low attendance inspired you to take a different approach: Plan B.

The Plan B involved in-person 'Study With Us' sessions based in Halls of Residence, using Residential Assistants (RAs). More importantly, it was great to see this attract 15 volunteers, helping to support sessions across exams.

## Next steps and additional questions

The presentation concluded with four useful reflections:

- Sessions had clear benefits for those that attended.
- Most interest was from Levels 3/4, PGT/R and distance learners.
- There was demand for joining the sessions, but not running them.
- The time and effort required to support the peer-led sessions are equal to or greater than running the sessions in-house.

## ***Author's reflection***

I found the discussion which took place after my presentation most interesting and reassuring that many Learning Developers were having similar results with similar sessions in their institutions. I quite like the 'Shut up and write' title for the sessions as it seems a bit more to the point than 'Study With Us'. Maybe 'Shut up and revise' might work around exam times. Jackie's point is interesting as I had never considered that the onsite Halls at UoN are unusual. This might be something to take advantage of considering the relative success of the in-person sessions. I think there is potential to engage specifically with the neurodiverse community as well.

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Amy May has been teaching Animal Science in further education and higher education since 2007. More recently, she has moved into learning development at the University of Nottingham. Her current research interests include academic integrity and academic resilience.

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