

# Learning of academics in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic

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## Abstract

*This article explores academics' learning. Specifically, it focuses on how academics have come to practise differently under the abrupt changes caused by responses to the Coronavirus pandemic. We argue that people's practices—for example, academics' practices of teaching and research—are ordinarily held in place by combinations of arrangements that form practice architectures. Many existing practice architectures enabling and constraining academics' practices were disrupted when the pandemic broke. To meet the imperatives of these changed arrangements, academics have been obliged to recreate their lives, and their practices. We present case stories from four individual academics in Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Australia. Building on a view of learning as coming to practice differently and as situated in particular sites, we explore these academics' changed practices—working online from home with teaching, research, and collegial interactions. The changes demonstrate that academics have learned very rapidly how to manage their work and lives under significantly changed conditions. Our observations also suggest that the time of the Novel Coronavirus has led to a renewal of the communitarian character of academic life. In learning to practise academic life and work differently, we have also recovered what we most value in academic life and work: its intrinsically communitarian character.*

*Keywords: practice architectures; practice theory; professional learning; Coronavirus pandemic; higher education*

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## Introduction

On April 29, 2020, the Johns Hopkins University Novel Coronavirus counter reported 3,132,363 cases worldwide of COVID-19 (the disease caused by the virus), and 217,947 deaths. At the time we wrote those words, we were aware that Death stalked our streets, our supermarkets, our hospitals. The health crisis triggered an economic crisis expected to be more severe than the 1929-1934 Great

Depression. Millions were thrown out of work, as enterprises were starved of supplies, customers, and clients. Almost everyone was required to make changes to the ways we lived our everyday lives.

In this article, we focus on the *practices* that make up the everyday lives of academics, at home and at work. We follow Kemmis (2018, p. 2-3) in defining a practice as:

a form of human action in history, in which particular activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of particular ideas and talk (sayings), and when the people involved are distributed in particular kinds of relationships (relatings), and when this combination of sayings, doings and relatings ‘hangs together’ in the project of the practice (the ends and purposes that motivate the practice).

We know that changing established practices can be difficult (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Practices can be resistant to change; we may reproduce them in new situations, although we also vary them to meet changing conditions (Kemmis, 2020). Sometimes, when conditions require it, however, our practices can be transformed; sometimes, they evolve into new species.

In our view, people’s practices are ordinarily held in place (enabled and constrained) by combinations of arrangements that form *practice architectures* (Kemmis et al., 2014) which together establish the ways they unfold. These ideas are informed by the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014; Mahon, Francisco, & Kemmis, 2017). This is a form of practice theory (Nicolini, 2012) which holds that people encounter one another and the world in their practices, as they happen, in three dimensions of intersubjective space. These dimensions are (1) semantic space, where we encounter one another as interlocutors (in the medium of language); (2) physical space-time, where we encounter one another as embodied beings (in the medium of activity and work); and (3) social space, where we encounter each other and the world as social beings (in the medium of solidarity and power).

As indicated in Kemmis’s (2018) definition of practices quoted above, the theory of practice architectures presents practices as composed of (1) sayings, (2) doings, and (3) relatings that hang together in the project (purpose) of the practice. These three elements of a practice are always combined in a practice; they do not appear separately or alone. They also correspond (respectively) to the three dimensions of intersubjective space noted above, and are enabled and constrained by three different kinds of arrangements found in or brought to a site (Schatzki, 2002) of practice. These are (1) cultural-discursive arrangements (e.g., languages, discourses), (2) material-economic arrangements (e.g., office spaces and furniture, classrooms, digital technologies, disease), and (3) social-political arrangements (e.g., hierarchies, collegial relationships, government-university ties). In various kinds of combinations, these three different kinds of arrangements can together

form practice architectures that enable and constrain the ways practices unfold. If our practices were like a flowing river, then these practice architectures would be the bed and banks that direct the river's flow. But, just as the river in flood can reshape its bed and banks, so, too, practices can reshape the practice architectures that enable and constrain them.

The Novel Coronavirus pandemic disrupted many existing arrangements in academics' work and lives, obliging academics to recreate their lives and their practices, and in some respects to reorient, or create new, arrangements. Through case stories, we describe some of the abrupt changes that occurred in the working lives and academic practices of four individual academics in Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Australia (four of the authors of this article). The changes demonstrate that academics learned very rapidly how to manage their work and lives under significantly changed conditions. This article explores this learning.

We take a particular view of learning. While some regard learning solely as 'the acquisition of knowledge' (e.g., Schatzki, 2017), we regard learning as also *coming to practise differently* (Kemmis, 2020). In our view, learning is evident in changes in *other* practices. Kemmis et al. (2014) wrote of learning as 'being stirred in to practices' or (following Wittgenstein, 1958) as 'coming to know how to go on in practices'. Kemmis and colleagues (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 58; Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018, pp. 116-120) take the view that knowledge (and learning) arises from, represents, recalls, anticipates, and returns to its use in practices. Given its origins in social practices, knowledge is not the accomplishment or property of lone individuals; it is historically, culturally, materially, and socially constructed.

In this article, then, we show academics coming to practise differently, that is, learning. We see that their learning is *situated* in the particular sites (Schatzki, 2002) and circumstances of their everyday work and lives. Following Lave (2019), we understand their learning as shaped by the historical conditions in which their practices occur. These conditions leave indelible marks on *what* changes in people's practices, *how* they practise, and *why* they practise as they do. While Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning is *situated*, Lave (2019) critiques and renews the notion of situated learning. Her view is that learning is evident in, and shaped by, people's everyday life and practices; it is also shaped by people's participation in communities of practice, for example, in workplaces, families, and educational settings; and learning occurs in relation to the changing cultural, material, social conditions under which people participate in everyday life; so that people's very identities bear the traces of how and what they have learned under those particular conditions.

Building on this rich view of how learning is situated, we explore academics' learning as they come to practise differently under new conditions. In the next section, we give a general context for how the four countries are handling the Coronavirus crisis. We then present case stories showing some of the things four of the authors learned in order to do our work under changed conditions, also putting this on the historical record while we are still in the thick of the Coronavirus

crisis. Then, we use the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014; Mahon, Francisco, & Kemmis, 2017) to show how academics came to practise differently, and consider some implications for future practice.

### **Case stories**

Our case stories come from Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Australia. Norway registered the first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020, after which the number of cases started to increase rapidly. On March 12, Norway introduced what Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg called ‘the strongest and most sweeping measures Norway has seen in peacetime’<sup>3</sup>, closing schools, universities, and other public places. About a week later than in Norway, Finland followed the Norwegian trend in cases of COVID-19, and in public and official attitudes in responses to the virus. The virus arrived in Sweden at approximately the same time as its neighbours. The Swedish government’s measures were not as restrictive as those in Norway and Finland, and were based more on public recommendations than extensive regulations. Like Norway and Finland, Australia also went into near-total lockdown after March 15, closing public spaces, prohibiting meetings of more than two people, and limiting travel to and from the country as well as internally. This article was written between March and June 2020. While the situation was constantly and rapidly changing, and the outcomes were as yet unknown, we could already predict that the pandemic would have long-lasting impacts in our societies.

The case stories are *our* stories (Ela’s, Mervi’s, Kathleen’s, and Susanne’s); that is, they are the stories of particular persons, rather than generalisable accounts of what is happening in the relevant countries as a whole. In writing these accounts, we acknowledge that the impact of the pandemic on our own lives has been relatively minor compared to the impacts others have endured, including health care workers who were working daily to support the sick and dying (many living apart from their families to avoid infecting them), those grieving the loss of loved ones, and the precarious situations of others (like people trapped in abusive households) who did not have safe places to retreat to. As narrators, we draw on our everyday lives in the way Camus described in his novel *The Plague*, originally published in 1947. ‘The present narrator has three kinds of data: First, what he saw himself; secondly, the accounts of other eyewitnesses ... and lastly, documents that subsequently came into his hands’ (p. 6).

Constructing the stories as they are presented in this paper was a collaborative process. In the first versions of the stories, which formed the initial corpus for analysis, authors wrote in detail about the current situation from their own perspectives, highlighting the impact the pandemic had on teaching and research practices, community engagement, and personal situations. These versions were loosely informed by the theory of practice architectures (a theoretical framework that guides or scholarship), although explicit references to the theory were not included. Each story was then iteratively developed, redeveloped, and

condensed in relation to the others. Individual re-writing, a form of analysis in and of itself<sup>4</sup>, was interspersed with analytical discussions among the five authors, as a team. In these discussions, we asked each other questions and acted as ‘mirrors’ to each other’s stories (cf. Sjølie, Francisco, & Langelotz, 2019). Again, informed by the theory of practice architectures, we also identified patterns and points of difference in relation to emerging themes. Thus, the stories contain traces of the original data that we collaboratively analysed and built on through a reflexive analytical process, and they are products of that analysis<sup>5</sup>. The stories serve as cases of learning in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic; of changed or new academic practices.

Some of the major changes to our academic practices during the pandemic are highlighted in the following stories in relation to changed practice architectures (e.g., doing academic work from home, teaching online) that shaped and were shaped by those practices.

#### *A story from Norway*

What has become clear to me through the Corona situation is that academics are able to change very quickly when circumstances require. What seemed impossible just a few months ago is now reality. Overnight, teachers all over the country were pushed into the world of online teaching, with highly varied experiences and expertise. In a matter of days, my university created online resources for faculty staff, and the unit I work in was strongly involved in this work. My unit is responsible for a Teamwork course that all master’s students go through, in total 2,700 students. The course is organised in 100 different classes of about 30 students with groups of 5-6 students working together. Fifty per cent of the grade is assessment of collaborative skills (shown through reflection in a report). Students are observed and facilitated, to stimulate them to reflect on (and possibly change) their collaboration while they’re working. The course is taught each Wednesday all day, combining activities in the class and in the student groups. The core of the course is that students meet face to face and that they are observed by trained facilitators. Until recently, it was seen as impossible that this course could be done any way other than meeting face to face. Two years ago, however, my university merged with three university colleges. One of these colleges conducts large parts of their teaching online, and we had a small project developing a version of the Teamwork course for a virtual learning environment. The facilitators observe and intervene via digital platforms, which naturally calls for quite different practices. The experiences from this project turned out to be crucial when the campuses closed on March 12, 2020. In a matter of days, a ‘training program’ for academic staff was developed, and from the first day of teaching after the close-down, all 100 Teamwork classes were taught in a virtual learning environment. Most of us (if not all) would have said that was impossible two years ago.

This is just one of many examples of joint efforts to adapt to the sudden changes introduced by the Corona crisis. Around the country, we see signs of increased community spirit. Our change efforts have been helped by the Norwegian

tradition of *dugnad*—a term for voluntary work done together with others. It is most commonly identified with outdoor cleaning in housing co-operatives, but is also used in many other settings. The word *dugnadsånd* is translatable to ‘the spirit of willingness to work together for a better community’. During the Corona situation, the word is ‘everywhere’ and countless new combinations of the word have been created (for example *Corona-dugnad for digital teachers*). The word is also frequently used by politicians and media. Our prime minister repeatedly calls the response to the crisis a *nasjonal dugnad* to emphasise the importance of everyone doing their share. The voluntary nature of *dugnad* might, however, be better described as quasi-mandatory, since not participating does have social consequences. *Dugnad* is therefore also used as a way to monitor each other, for example, in social media.

The biggest change to my work is that I now work from home, meeting and communicating with colleagues (and friends) entirely online. I have no access to campus unless I need to get something from my office. The impact of this change is perhaps also the most surprising. To work from home has usually been an enabler for me to do research-related work. The home office has worked as a welcome contrast to busy days in the office. When the Corona crisis hit, one of my (selfish) thoughts was that it might actually lead to some extra time. However, working alone *from* home is of course very different from working *at* home in the same space as the whole family of five, and it is no longer a ‘distraction-free’ zone. Work efficiency dropped considerably, and I have had to work on recreating some functionable working arrangements. We have created five working stations in the house, and each morning my husband and I synchronise today’s meeting schedule (which meetings require the office, and which can be done in the living room or in the bedroom if some of the kids have moved to the common areas). Most importantly, however, I try to define in my daily schedule when it is time for work, home schooling, meals, exercise, and family time. I also need to be very aware of when to read news (and when not to read). This all sounds good in theory, but it is not always easy to follow. Many days I find myself in a blur of work and household activities, leaving me with a feeling at the end of the day that all I do is work but at the same time feeling that I have achieved very little.

If I look at my practices, many of the things I do can still be done almost as before, for example, research activities with international colleagues. Also, in my unit, we already had well established digital collaboration practices after we started to use Microsoft Teams about a year ago. Although this was a major advantage, we have still had to make some changes when we suddenly lost the possibility to meet each other in person, in particular how we conduct and chair meetings. We have learned to use more of the available digital tools provided by the video conference platforms to engage participants. Also, digital meetings need a tighter structure, and generally the meetings have become shorter and often more effective, in that we are clearer about what we have achieved and how to proceed after the meeting. Within the new conditions we have been forced to think more about how we do things rather than just continue to do as we usually do.

I do, however, find the lack of human connection challenging. Without the possibility for a chat at the coffee machine or a laugh around the lunch table, I feel kind of drained of energy. The informal meeting places have been partly replaced by a social channel on *Teams* to share ‘fun stuff’ and *Zoom* coffee chats, but it does not replace the energy I usually get from meeting colleagues and friends face to face. I am also often too tired from the day’s digital meetings to join the zoom chats (another digital meeting). As many of my colleagues are feeling the same way, we have just introduced walk-and-talk when the meeting form allows it. While this might be a reasonable temporary replacement, I cannot wait to be able to return to my office and meet my colleagues again.

#### *A story from Finland*

My job includes managing an art-research project looking at *relational wellbeing* in the lives of young refugees in Finland, Norway, and the UK. Many of the practices of starting a project have been unchanged with the COVID-19; I can continue writing ethics applications, refining research instruments, and contacting stakeholders and gatekeepers as usual. Some other practices have needed rethinking: I have had to plan how to recruit without meeting participants; how to appear as a nice, approachable, and friendly (i.e. human) researcher virtually; and how to move art-making online, if needed. These are manageable challenges, but the situation has also pushed me to rethink some of the more fundamental questions related to the substance of our study. As people’s ‘real’ relationships turn into virtual ones, I am learning (but I don’t know yet) what happens to the relational wellbeing. Will people’s relationships reduce in quality and quantity or will they just change their form? What kind of wellness can virtual ties create, and for whom? Perhaps most importantly, I will probably find out what this forced physical distancing may mean for our research participants, young refugees who have already been forcibly moved from their home countries and away from their relationships. On the other hand, I have often felt that the gap between my experiences as a privileged white Finnish woman, and of those who participate in my research, is too big to allow us to fully understand each other. Now I feel, for a moment, that the experience of the Corona puts us on the same boat: the everyday practices that matter for us all, of being with others, have equally changed for us. So, while my immediate learning has changed the practicalities of starting this research, enabling us to launch the study in the best possible way, the more interesting, yet-to-come changes might fundamentally change my understanding of the focus and my positionality in this study.

Another big change is that my work has moved home. Like many other academics, I homeschool, feed, and care for young children during the days. Things got easier when most Finnish schools started providing lunches for students. Microwavable lunches add an hour of work time, but they are also crucial for many families’ wellbeing. The days start by going through the timetables and tasks for us all. Then, after breakfast, we withdraw into separate corners, getting on with our meetings and online tasks as much as our shared wifi allows (not enough). Most of

my time is spent hopping between the four children making sure all understand and stay on task. Then, if things go well, I might sneak in some work time before preparing lunch. Zoom-meetings offer welcome punctuation for the days, as physically distant colleagues enter my living room. My children, dog, and partner also make involuntary visits to these same meetings. This all has blurred the boundaries between free- and work-time, family- and work-communities, and, overall, my public and private life.

The situation has condensed most of my work into short bursts of activity, taking place in early mornings and late nights, and my desire or need to work at any other time makes me almost feel guilty. Chats with colleagues in other life situations remind me that during COVID-19, our everyday lives really divide us more than before: some feel they now have more time and space for creative work. Others are struggling to keep their heads above water. For parents with young children, the requirement and the will for being creative and productive may be the same, but space and quiet time enabling this is gone.

While most of the work gets done online, sometimes in the wee hours, I have realised getting work done is not enough. The situation highlights how the communal aspects really make this work worthwhile, and how we *feel* about the work we do. I miss spending quality time and properly meeting, in person, people I enjoy meeting. I miss being able to supervise doctoral students face to face, reading their body language and other non-verbal cues of how they are doing. I am privileged to have colleagues who I want to be able to get together with, shake hands (without gloves), hug, eat together, have a beer together, sit at the same table, and work closely together, but this is now gone. Strangely, this forced distance feels particularly hard in our international Pedagogy, Education and Praxis (PEP) research network, which functions largely online anyway. Although the relationships in PEP have a long history of maintaining their high quality without frequent face to face meetings, knowing that we *can't* meet makes me feel the loss in new ways. How long will this situation last? Do we learn to keep important work relationships alive and functional with only virtual connections? We don't know, but we are doing our best to change our practices to adapt to the new arrangements. So, the most significant changes brought by the COVID-19 are the practical challenges of starting a new research project, the blurring lines between private and personal time/space/community, and the lack of physical contact with people I enjoy spending time with. How leaders in different universities understand these changing conditions seems to differ. In one big university, staff were urged to take advantage of the 'newly freed time' to read books, write articles, and apply for grants. Understandably, this caused reactions among staff whose time was reduced rather than freed, and who thought that reading, writing, and applying for grants should be part of the academic workload anyway. In my university, it is acknowledged that some of us might need to prioritise and do only what is needed. I can also see collegial helping unlike before: people with more IT-skills to assist in online teaching, or people in easier home situations who step up to help those in need. The spirit referred to as *dugnad* in Norway gets reawakened in Finnish crisis

times too, under the title of *talkoot* (unpaid, often semi-mandatory work for the common good). My university's staff meetings also reveal the anxiety of people in managerial and administrative positions, who on the one hand face the struggle of the workers at the moment, but on the other, understand the even greater struggle that the declining economy will cause. The common message seems to be that universities' functions will be secured; that teaching, research, and engagement will continue; and that we will get over this. I recognise that I am in a privileged position to be able to collaborate with people I like and, while distance does not stop it, distance does take some of the fun out of it. We are all learning how to make research network meetings collaborative and fruitful when working from a distance and across different time zones. We are also considering what we can let go while still keeping what matters in our shared work. At the same time, I am hoping that the rapid changes in arrangements that have been imposed on us by the crisis will push us to learn more environmentally-sustainable practices that we can maintain after the crisis passes. And I will enjoy work even more when we return to the communal aspects of life in the face-to-face world, or if I can learn to be equally satisfied with meeting my communities online.

#### *A story from Sweden*

A few months ago, the words 'green level', 'yellow level' and 'red level' meant nothing to me. Now they signal how dramatically daily operations have changed at my university, like elsewhere in Sweden. My university is officially operating, for now at least, at a 'yellow level' in a three-level system put in place locally to signify the level of response to the virus. 'Yellow level' means that activities shift to online mode where possible, and the campus is closed to the public. So, university activities are continuing on a very restricted basis, and my colleagues and I are primarily working from home, while students are studying at a 'distance'. Staff and students were receiving regular updates from the University's 'crisis group' (established to make decisions about the University's response to government measures and advice), but there have been very few updates in the past three weeks, suggesting that we have now settled into new routines.

When the decision was made to move to 'yellow level', there was a mad flurry of activity to digitise all classes and interactions with students. For those working in some discipline areas, online mode is the usual *modus operandi*, but for many others, digital lessons are a very new phenomenon. The sudden shift to digital education thus sparked frantic efforts to become familiar with a whole new set of technologies and ways of teaching. All this was aimed at allowing students and staff to continue working/studying safely at a distance, so students would not miss a beat in their education.

I work in an education department that is responsible, among other things, for professional learning opportunities and pedagogical courses for university staff. Those in my department specialising in digital education found themselves, not surprisingly, working around the clock to support others who were completely new to the world of online learning and teaching. Despite having some

previous experience myself of online teaching in a former workplace, like many of my colleagues across the university, I took online ‘crash courses’ and did all manner of things to help make a very quick transition to ‘distance’ mode. This included reading what I could about, and experimenting with, online lectures, using ‘breakout rooms’ for group work in Zoom, and using the tools in my university’s learning platform more creatively, for instance. It also included developing some video-recorded lectures for which I hope course participants will forgive me, and that I never want to look at again. I have been lucky in a sense that assessment and many activities in the pedagogical courses I teach are somewhat manageable in an online environment. Those teaching in subjects that rely on laboratories, specialist equipment, community engagement, and/or industry/practicum placements, for instance, have had the added challenges of working out how to foster learning, assess students fairly, and make it possible for students to meet course requirements without access to certain resources, people, and experiences. Despite the challenges, and perhaps past reservations and nervousness about online learning, it seems that my teaching colleagues and I are just getting on with the job of digitising almost everything. People are doing the best they can.

The directive for staff to work from home *if possible* came some time after we had been on ‘yellow level’. I believe the idea behind it was to allow those who need to work on campus to do so without coming into unnecessary contact with others. I have been one of those needing to work on campus occasionally, for example, on days when I have needed stable, reliable internet connection for extended periods (i.e., all day teaching in Zoom). I am not the only one, it seems, and when I have encountered others (mostly administrative staff), the short conversations at a ‘safe distance’ have been very strange indeed.

Coping with the lack of regular face-to-face contact with colleagues has been the most challenging part of the working-at-a-distance experience. Our relationships at work, and our collaborative endeavours, have, traditionally, been an important part of what makes our work meaningful, sustaining, and fun. ‘Online *fikas*’ (morning/afternoon coffee) emerged in the early ‘yellow level’ days as a new arrangement for catching up socially and for light relief from the gravity and isolating effects of our circumstances. My immediate supervisor introduced daily online *fikas* each day via Zoom, and staff are welcome to drop in online if they wish. This perhaps provides a way for him to ‘check in’ on his staff and make sure that all are OK, in the way he might have formerly popped his head into people’s offices on his way through the corridor of an afternoon, but I am sure it has been an important opportunity for some to stay connected with others during this time of profoundly changed arrangements.

Researching-at-a-distance has not meant such a significant shift in practice, partly because much of my research work is with international colleagues, and we already rely extensively on digital communication. However, research activity locally has been slowed somewhat because people’s (collaborators/potential collaborators) workloads have intensified, and their priorities have changed. My own research activity has also been squeezed even further into late night and

weekend spaces in favour of urgent teaching tasks. A further change has been widespread cancellation of conferences and national or international meetings, and for some conferences, a speedy conversion to digital mode. I never thought I would consider it myself, but there I was, late last week, with colleagues (online) trying to work out how we can turn an annual face to face symposium later in the year into an online event. We hope it won't come to that, but we will probably do it (if it becomes necessary) rather than postpone and lose the momentum created by previous years' symposia conversations.

#### *A story from Australia*

For people living in Australia, the Coronavirus came shortly after the most destructive bushfires the country had ever experienced. From December through until the rains came in late January, there were out of control bushfires in at least one area of Australia and often hundreds at the same time. About seventy people died, thousands of homes were destroyed or damaged, and most of the population was impacted to a greater or lesser extent by smoke that was hundreds of times above safe levels to breathe. At our university, all-staff bushfire messages finished in late January, to be replaced by all-staff COVID-19 messages from February 17. Australians had thus been emotionally impacted even before we were faced with the impact of the Coronavirus.

I began to work from home two weeks before it was required. Permission was required to do this. However, there was no resistance to my decision, I just needed to fill in some related documentation. This is indicative of changed administrative practices that have occurred during the pandemic. Practices that had in the past been difficult to change because of administrative constraints have now become more flexible. I soon realised that it would be easier to work if I took home some equipment from my university office (an ergonomic chair, two screens, a docking station for my laptop). Because I'd moved early there were no restrictions on returning to the office to get what I needed. In the past, I worked on the kitchen table when working at home; once the arrangement became more permanent, I was able to turn a spare room into an office relatively easily, knowing there would be no visitors for some time.

I usually teach entirely online, and so have not experienced the difficulties related to a rapid move to online teaching that others have. Where appropriate, I have assisted others to make the transition to online teaching, but this has not been demanding because the university has a strong online learning support system of people whose role is to help academics teach online. These education designers are now being overloaded, and are working long hours to try to meet the changed needs. Discussions with people from other universities reveal that some academics are finding themselves entirely on their own in navigating the move to online teaching. I live three hours' drive from the city where the rest of my school is located (my 'home campus'—my office is at a different campus of the university, in the city where I live), so am accustomed to limited face-to-face interaction with my work colleagues. Over the years, I have managed this separation through travelling to my

home campus about every six weeks for four days, and maximising interaction during those times. All other interactions were via irregular phone calls with my teaching team, or Zoom meetings with my research teams. During the Coronavirus pandemic, my colleagues are finding themselves more isolated, and have arranged Zoom meetings and Zoom 'coffee chats'. As a consequence, on a day to day basis, I am having more interaction with colleagues than ever before.

Prior to the pandemic, I had just begun to re-establish productive working strategies after the impact of the December-January bushfires (our holiday house was partly burnt in the fires, and we are still working with insurance companies and builders to manage repairs). These re-established strategies were beginning to secure the exercise I needed, the meal arrangements that worked for me, and the work that I needed to complete. The changes to these arrangements as a result of the pandemic caused further disruption. Especially in the beginning, motivation became an issue. I was also not getting the exercise I needed, meal arrangements had altered, and in the short term my productivity decreased.

Some prior research plans have needed to be altered. Rather than trying to undertake site visits in alternative ways, I have postponed them. Depending on how long we are impacted by the changed conditions, this might mean the research timeline is extended. I am focusing instead on analysing other forms of data gathered. Our university is providing research grants for Coronavirus-related research, and so this has provided other opportunities.

In the first draft of this case story, I did not include the emotional and motivational impact of the pandemic and the associated changes. On reflection, however, it became apparent that part of the changes that have occurred involve the blurring of the personal and the professional. There have been a number of personal things that have impacted on my ability to fulfil my role as an academic. Time is now being taken up in different ways. Mundane day-to-day things are impacting on the time available for other things. For instance, after an unsuccessful foray into online grocery shopping, time now needs to be devoted to sometimes waiting in line outside the supermarket so that spatial distancing can be maintained inside the supermarket. Then when the shopping is brought home, all items need to be washed down. Supporting adult children to manage their own changes at this time takes time and emotional energy that might otherwise have been devoted to my work (I am not suggesting that I regret this, just identifying it as a relevant factor). The death of a previously fit and healthy acquaintance due to COVID-19 was a shock that impacted on my motivation to work. In this time of lockdown, where most other activities are curtailed, I find myself intermittently in the garden throughout my working day. This has led to insights that have informed the writing and teaching that I have been doing, and I suspect these insights may not have emerged otherwise.

At a broad level the economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is impacting on arrangements within the university where I am employed, as well as across the Australian university sector more broadly. Some universities are decreasing the availability of internal research grants, and together with the

expected decrease in grants from government and business sources, these changes will impact research for some time to come. Management across the Australian university sector are also identifying the likelihood of staff layoffs, decreased hours for some staff, and an across the board salary reduction for all staff. Academics are aware that if they lose their jobs at one university their chances of getting one at another university are minimal. These discussions increase the uncertainties inherent in the present environment.

### **Practising differently amidst existing and changed practice architectures**

In these four case stories, we see how profoundly the *everyday lives and practices* of these academics changed in the time of the Coronavirus. In the discussion that follows, we explore these changes, and the academics' learning, in conversation with the theory of practice architectures. We focus, in particular, on working from home, working online, some new discourses framing our work, and changed relationships.

#### *Working in alternative spaces (material-economic arrangements)*

An obvious change to the everyday life and practices of these four academics was related to working from their home rather than from a university office. For many academics already doing some work at home, the physical transition was relatively easy, helped by the fact that the protagonists in our four case stories had infrastructure in place that could, generally speaking, accommodate the move to a home office and online teaching and collaboration. The material and relational affordances of each individual's home as a workspace varied considerably across cases, however. In relation to physical arrangements, this included basic furniture such as a suitable desk and chair, adequate computer equipment, and adequate wifi sufficient to meet needs for internet access for two adults and several children working and studying from home. It also included access to a physical space where work could be undertaken. From the perspective of the theory of practice architectures, then, everyday academic practices were no longer enabled and constrained by the arrangements found in academics' university offices, amidst the resources, facilities, and equipment provided by the university. Instead, academic work was conducted in competition with the everyday practices of home and family life: making meals, watching TV, using social media via devices, getting children out of bed in the morning, and so on.

The practice architectures that provided conditions of possibility for academic work in the office were replaced by practice architectures designed to support the practices of home life. And so academic practices were *practised differently* from home—for example, to fit around home schooling and family management practices through which parents supported their children. In two case stories, working from home under these circumstances meant that people had to create new arrangements to accommodate all members of the family, such as a

coordinated timetable for work, homeschooling, meals, and social time. These changed practice architectures reshaped the sayings, doings, and relatings of academics' practices: what was said, and how it was said, in academic practices; where and when things were done, and the ways they were done; and how people related to one another and the world around them. There were new limits on how teaching was practised, for example, when a university teacher could now connect with students only in the late evening or the early morning.

There was variation across the case stories in the extent to which the university supported academics working from home. The academic in the Australian case took an ergonomic chair, computer monitors, and other office equipment home to support working from home. The academic in the Swedish case still had access to her university office, with the usual university infrastructure; she divided her time between the office and home. The Finnish academic could book a time to go to the university to print documents, but work had to be done from home. The Norwegian academic (like the Australian), had no access to university offices except under special circumstances. The onus was on the academics to ensure they could work effectively from home, with appropriate ergonomic furniture, computers, monitors, and wifi infrastructure—that is, the universities expected that the relevant academic practices could be transferred to academics' homes (perhaps even expecting the same work capacity), but they did not unambiguously take responsibility for ensuring that the appropriate practice architectures were in place to support working from home. (Some private Nordic firms, by contrast, paid staff working from home an amount of money sufficient to ensure that they could purchase needed equipment, furniture and infrastructure.)

Perhaps the most dramatic shift caused by the pandemic, was the shift to working almost entirely online. The Swedish case story describes how many academics had to change from teaching almost solely in face-to-face mode to teaching completely online, some for the very first time, and some with students who were not familiar with formal online learning arrangements. By contrast, in the Australian case story, teaching was already entirely online. In the Norwegian example, there was a shift from just a few staff, to all staff teaching online; that is, the practice architectures of a small-scale project exploring digital teaching prefigured the response when all teaching had to go online. In the Finnish case story, doctoral supervision was no longer conducted face-to-face, but instead online. The shift to working online meant that some academics were being stirred into (Kemmis et al., 2014) a new discourse about teaching online (sayings), new ways of using technology for the various aspects of educational work (doings), and new ways of relating to students, colleagues, and others digitally (relatings). Others, by contrast, were already experienced in teaching online, and did not need to modify their teaching practices to the same extent (although some now became facilitators of learning to teach online for their less experienced online colleagues).

In all four case stories, meetings with colleagues shifted online; indeed, most collaboration and communication with colleagues occurred via digital platforms or by phone. This led to changes in the frequency, structure, and formality

of various kinds of meetings, with more explicit practices of managing participation than in the former physical meetings.

One might say that the online shift led to some of our academic practices—teaching, researching, working with colleagues—becoming ‘disembodied’ to the extent that we lost the tactile, face-to-face, aspect of the practice. Non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language were now processed via video on a computer screen with possibly blurry images and ‘hakkete’ (Norwegian for ‘breaking up’) sound due to unstable internet connections.

*New discourses framing our work (cultural-discursive arrangements)*

In a very short space of time, the discourses framing our working lives changed. In addition to the online discourses mentioned above, one obvious example is the academic language of *epidemiology*. People were required to learn about epidemiology (and the meaning of the word for a start), for example, to understand what Novel Coronavirus and COVID-19 are and mean. The specialist discourse of public health, unfamiliar to most of us just two months ago, became part of our everyday language, such as ‘social distancing’, ‘self-isolation’, ‘flattening the curve’, ‘herd immunity’, and the basic reproduction number  $R_0$ .

We also became familiar with languages of *crisis management* and emergency response. That the Swedish university raised its emergency level to ‘yellow’, that Norway and Finland introduced the ‘most serious restrictions ever in peacetime’, and that ‘lives and livelihoods’ could no longer be taken for granted (Australia) reminded us that we were in a global crisis. It also reminded us that the crisis was managed by politicians and leaders and that our task was to stay up to date and comply with the changes required.

Part of the language of crisis management was language used to build community spirit and to emphasise the importance that each and everyone participates. In Australia, the expression ‘we’re all in this together’ was used; in Norway, people and politicians used the word and tradition of *dugnad* to justify the restrictions that closed down the society, but also to monitor that the restrictions were followed. The Finnish word *talkoot* has a similar meaning, and was appropriated for the COVID-19 discourse. In Finland, nationwide *talkoot* was previously called for mostly in times of war, most famously during the Winter War of 1939-1940 with Russia. In Sweden, there is no exact equivalent for *dugnad* or *talkoot*, but leaders appealed to citizens to use ‘common sense’ and take ‘individual responsibility’. These are examples of known words and expressions that have been politicised, or given new inflections of meaning, during the Corona crisis. It might also be the case that *dugnad* or *talkoot* or ‘being in this together’ were not voluntary at all, but rather were aimed at achieving a kind of ‘forced solidarity’ so populations would comply with the new restrictions. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the crisis brought out extraordinary voluntary expressions of community spirit and communal care from people acting with great compassion for others.

*Changed relationships at work—and at home (social-political arrangements)*

Almost overnight, we academics were obliged to relate to others differently. We met our colleagues only via digital technologies, and spent most of our time with the family (at least mostly being in the same physical space). For some working relationships, collaborating digitally was the norm since before the Coronavirus crisis, as was the case for our international collaboration through the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis (PEP) research network to which we all belong. Most of our other academic relationships, however, were previously based on face-to-face collaboration and meeting colleagues in the staff room or corridor (for example). Creating conditions of possibility for continuing collegial friendships and academic solidarities through the crisis time involved creating digital replacements for on-campus social spaces (Zoom coffee breaks, for example) and new ways of meeting (such as walk-and-talk).

The changes in relationships accompanying the pandemic threw into sharp relief the amount of *emotional work* academics was obliged to do to cope with the crisis. One aspect of this was the greater attention university teachers gave to looking after students, responding to their situations and vulnerabilities, and trying to help them towards success in their studies. Likewise, those of us who do research with vulnerable populations, such as refugee children and youth, now sensed that their vulnerabilities were heightened, and felt responsibility to look after them.

Another aspect was supporting colleagues, for example those inexperienced with online teaching. But there was also recognition that some academic colleagues live alone, and may have found isolation ('iso' as it is sometimes called in Australia) challenging to endure; many people stayed connected to ensure that isolated academic colleagues did not become anxious or depressed.

Still another aspect was looking after children at home, while working from home, and while working early mornings and late nights to get academic work done. Established patterns of working relationships were disrupted, and it required a considerable emotional investment to maintain or retain the kinds of relationships we previously took for granted as appropriate in relation to students, colleagues, and family.

*The boundaries between the professional and the private*

Working from home meant that the boundaries between the professional and the private became blurred, which in turn led to changed relations. Video conferences brought us directly into people's home offices, living rooms, and even bedrooms, often with a child, a spouse, or a pet sneaking into the picture. That might not have been very different from how we previously connected with some of our closest colleagues, but the difference now was that all meetings potentially brought what was previously private into a public space.

There was also something socially- and psychologically-flattening for each of us as we participated in all meetings, with everyone, from the same physical places at home. (No wonder that some people wear silly hats to meetings to break

the monotony! Or that some people have found the benefits of virtual backgrounds in Zoom!) ‘Zoom fatigue’ was a trending expression through April—describing the draining effect video meetings have on us.

Despite these changes, we were aware that we were privileged to have work, to be able to work from home, and to have the facilities available to us that enabled this to happen.

### **What have we been learning?**

It is clear from the case stories that we as academics were learning many things in order to continue our academic practices through the crisis, but we also learned to *practise differently* under changed conditions. A few of the many things we learned to practise differently include:

- to adapt to not being able to meet colleagues face-to-face, and instead meet and understand them in online spaces;
- to facilitate student and staff teams not in person, but in online mode;
- to use new technological tools (like breakout rooms in Zoom instead of breaking up into small groups in a classroom) to support effective teaching that facilitates students’ learning;
- to recruit research participants not in person, but through phone and video meetings;
- to do our work not from our own offices and workplaces, but in workspaces at home which are shared with partners and children; and
- to support our children’s learning not just before and after they go to school, but also through the working day - and to facilitate their home schooling.

The work sites, composed of previously taken-for-granted practice architectures (offices, infrastructure, etc.), changed, and we were obliged to adapt our practices to working from home, with its different, and sometimes inferior (e.g., wifi and internet speeds) practice architectures. Nevertheless, the academics in this study were largely successful in making the transition, although not without some missteps (for example, in hesitantly learning to use new online tools), and with some regrets (for example, missing working alongside colleagues in familiar workplaces).

In some ways, our learning in this time could be viewed as somewhat instrumental since, at least initially, it involved reacting to changed conditions and the focus was on things like the technical aspects of online learning. But our learning endeavours aimed beyond merely having the next lesson prepared, or finding the most effective tool to complete a job. Rather, like many of our colleagues, we were committed to holding on to what is most important to us in our work as academics—doing meaningful, productive, praxis-oriented work, and interacting and connecting with people in meaningful ways, even when our

conditions were turned on their head. This was evident in what we tried to recreate in our altered arrangements, and the new or reoriented practice architectures that emerged. The learning we have described was guided by deep underlying commitments to the people with whom and for whom we work, and a motivation to do the best job we can in our circumstances, whilst also maintaining the relationships we hold dear in our personal lives. This is why we are now trying to understand what has happened and what we have been doing. Although, in some respects, we did what we were told to do, we found ways to act with the choices and capacities we have to fulfil our commitments, despite the tensions, and not dismissing the possibility that we could continue to fight for what will remain important in our work when we emerge from the Coronavirus crisis. In this way, our sense of self as academics has been strengthened by what we have experienced.

### *Resituating learning*

In the introduction we referred to Lave's (2019) view of learning. Her view is that learning (1) is evident in, and shaped by, people's everyday life and practices; (2) is shaped by people's participation in communities of practice, for example, in workplaces, families, and educational settings; and (3) occurs in relation to the changing cultural, material, social conditions that prevail as people participate in everyday life; so that (4) people's very identities bear the traces of how and what they have learned under these cultural, material, and social conditions (shaping their language, their activities, and their ways of relating to others and the world). Lave claims that knowledge, or, better, knowing, is a social process, and that it is *situated* in everyday lives; in communities of practice; that it is embedded in cultural, material and social conditions; and that it shapes and reshapes identities.

On the basis of the case stories and analysis presented here, we also see learning going on in order to *resituate* practices into new or changed practice architectures, and dramatically changed times and circumstances. Resituating practices may be on a spectrum that goes from varying a practice a little, for example, to play this tune on a different piano keyboard, to varying it very significantly, like playing the tune on a trumpet instead of a piano. Many of the transitions we have considered here are examples of significant variations. Academic practices were uprooted from their usual sites in the office, classrooms, and research sites of the university, and transplanted into our homes and virtual space. Sometimes the shift was not too onerous (as in the shift to Zoom meetings when we were already adept at Zoom meetings), but sometimes the shift was more precarious and less guaranteed of success (for example, when people without a history of online teaching were thrust into it, or when research that depended on warm personal relationships with refugee children had to proceed not in person but rather via more impersonal means like telephones and video-meetings).

We know that a tree or shrub that prospers in one location in a garden may take years to recover when transplanted to another location, perhaps with a different orientation to the sun, different patterns of sun and shade, different soil, different

exposure to winds and cold. We think there is power in this analogy for academic practices: what went well in the office or classroom may not go so well from home or online. Yet the academics in the case stories did their best to learn *to practise differently* under the new circumstances of the time of the Coronavirus, and they did their best to *resituate* their practices so they could be sustained in new sites in ways that do not diminish *the meaningful* in academic work.

But we could argue that this is exactly what is demanded of academics in non-pandemic circumstances: to be responsive to changing conditions and circumstances (even if the changes are less visible or less profoundly disruptive) and to create conditions of possibility for learning and human flourishing (including in the face of adversity). We suggest that this is part of what it means to engage in academic practice as ‘critical pedagogical praxis’ (Mahon, 2014): a kind of practice aimed, among other things, at creating spaces in which untoward or unsustainable practices and arrangements can be ‘understood and reoriented, and in which new possibilities for action can emerge and be enacted’ (Mahon, 2014, p. 4). That the unthinkable so quickly became realities in the corona pandemic, highlights not only how responsive, resourceful, and proactive academics can be, but also that university practice architectures, which appear to be unchangeable and inevitable, may be more malleable than we think. This is a source of hope for those deeply concerned about the present state of affairs in higher education and striving to change prevailing conditions.

## **Conclusion**

Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, many academic practices were rapidly transformed. In our case stories, we saw academics becoming more acutely aware of the need to connect and communicate with, and to contribute to, the students, disciplines, professions, and communities they serve. In the pandemic crisis, we saw academics self-organising so that the real work of the university—teaching, research, and community outreach—would survive and flourish in the time of the Coronavirus. This required unforeseeably rapid change in what we do and how we do it, and the associated learning to enable those changes to take place. Within the rapid changes needed to ensure that we were able to continue to do our work, we both experienced and witnessed academics recovering not only the lifeworlds that make academic work meaningful, efficacious, and valuable, but also the forms of collective decision-making that historically preceded the rise of executive management and decision making in the contemporary neoliberal university.

When the crisis of the pandemic passes, and we return to working from our offices and other spaces in the university, what features of our resituated practices will we preserve from the working-from-home time? For example, the pandemic has shown us that we may previously have taken our collegial relationships for granted; we have learned to value collegial solidarity more greatly since we have been obliged to endure the disembodied communication of the

working-from-home era. We have experimented with online seminars and conferences that have proven to be fruitful; perhaps this habit will stay, reducing our need to travel.

The case stories reported here suggest that the time of Coronavirus has helped renew the communitarian character of academic life in the contexts in which we work. In learning to practise academic life and work differently, resituating our practices to work from home and virtually, we also recovered what we most value in academic life and work: its intrinsically communitarian character. This is a timely reminder that academic work is founded in communities of practice in the disciplines, in the professions, in our work with students, and in academic communities within the university and in the local and global communities beyond. Our hope is that, as the pandemic crisis passes, and drawing on what they have learnt in the crisis, academic staff in universities will further nurture and develop the praxis-oriented, communitarian character of academic life.

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