

Coming to practice differently in the workplace: A practice architectures exploration of workplace learning in times of change

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Abstract

The recent pandemic resulted in significant changes in workplaces that saw people come to live and work differently. What was previously experienced and understood to be the ‘workplace’, along with associated work practices, has shifted and the construct of the workplace has become multiple as more people work remotely. We propose that these changes have also shifted practices of working, providing significant insights into how learning may be happening, not in ‘workplaces’ but rather in reformed ‘sites’ of work. To explore changed work and learning practices in sites of work, we adopt the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) to explore how workers in managing roles learned to practise their work differently in newly formed sites of work. This article provides evidence from semi-structured interviews with twelve managers during the changes wrought during the pandemic in Australia using the ‘Interview to the double’ approach (Nicolini, 2012). We highlight how the managers understood their changes in work and shows empirically how the concept of ‘workplace learning’ requires a reconceptualization of learning that rejects a focus on learning as defined by process and instead adopts a practice-based definition of learning as ‘coming to practice differently’ (Kemmis, 2021, p. 3).

Introduction

COVID-19 has challenged long held assumptions about what it means to work and learn (Sjølie et al. 2020; Watkins and Marsick 2021). Responding to this unexpected global shift has meant people are coming to live and work differently, adapting and creating new ways of living and working as a way of coping (or not) with the effects of the pandemic. In an

unprecedented fashion, what has been experienced and understood to be the ‘workplace’, along with associated work practices, has shifted. For many, the concept of the ‘workplace’ has become blurred with what may have been previously understood to be the ‘home’. It has become necessary for people to reinvent or integrate practices of work, leisure, relationships, caring responsibilities, and running a household that were more segregated prior to the pandemic. We propose that recent unprecedented changes, driven by the pandemic, have not only shifted places of work but also practices of working. This may provide significant insights into how learning may be happening (or not), not in ‘workplaces’ but rather in reformed ‘sites’ of work.

Much of the literature in ‘workplace learning’, is grounded in understandings of learning as intrinsically tied to working and places of working. Despite many years of research in the area of work and learning, there is little agreement on what work and learning are or how they should be defined (Manuti et al. 2015). Furthermore, the cross-disciplinary nature of the field has resulted in a wide array of models and terminology (Candy and Matthews 1998). In her work questioning the use of terms in work and learning research, Fenwick (2008) highlights that the key terms used in the field – work, learning, and workplace – are complex and contested. The very term workplace has long been recognised as problematic in contexts where there is often not a specific place of work and where locations of work can vary widely (Cole, Oliver, and Blaviesciunaite 2014). Never has this been more evident than in the shift to working remotely for many office-based workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, casting further doubt on the concept of a ‘workplace’ and on assumptions about the mechanisms of learning at and for work. The upheaval caused by the pandemic provides a unique opportunity to see work and learning differently, as it happens in sites of work, whatever and wherever these may be in time and space (Schatzki, 2010).

To explore changed work and learning practices in sites of work, we adopt the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Kemmis et al. 2014) and a practice-based definition of learning as ‘coming to practice differently’ (Kemmis, 2021, p. 3) to explore how workers in managing roles are learning to practise their work differently in newly formed sites of work where work may or may not heretofore have been the primary function of the site. This article draws on a subset of data from a study of the work and learning practices of twelve workers in managing roles during the COVID-19 crisis in Australia. This article highlights how these workers understood their changes in work and shows empirically how the concept of ‘workplace learning’ requires a reconceptualization of learning that rejects a focus on learning as defined by process.

The article first introduces TPA as the theoretical foundation for understanding a practice-based view of working and learning. We then introduce a study of workers in managing roles and discuss how these workers/managers were responding to the changes and how they talked about (or not) their learning during the time of COVID. Evidence from the study is used to highlight the utility of a practice-based approach to reconsidering learning. Finally, we discuss our findings including implications for assumptions that underpin learning in workplaces and the learning and development systems and processes that are based on them.

Theory of Practice architectures

The TPA is a practice-based approach that adopts a site ontology (Schatzki 2002) perspective where neither the individual nor the social is privileged and where practices provide the focus through which social life may be understood. Practices are not merely a manifestation of

individual action but have ‘extra-individual dimensions that compose the intersubjective space in which practices occur’ (Kemmis 2022, 77).

TPA understands social practices as encompassing ‘sayings, doings, and relatings’ (Kemmis and Mahon 2017, 3). Shared actions and activities among those enacting a practice comprise the *doings* of practices. The ways in which those enacting a practice talk ‘of’ and ‘in’ a practice and their shared understandings are the *sayings* of a practice. Finally, the ways in which those enacting a practice engage with others comprise the *relatings* of a practice (Kemmis and Mahon 2017). Sayings, doings, and relatings come together towards the ends, goals, or project of a practice (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008; Mahon et al. 2017).

Practices are held together by practice architectures, specifically three kinds of arrangements that create certain enabling or constraining conditions that may pre-exist and emerge in sites. Cultural-discursive arrangements prefigure the discourses used and which are characteristic of a practice. They enable and constrain the sayings of a practice. For instance, the increased use of health-related language throughout the pandemic. Material-economic arrangements prefigure materialities and time/space arrangements and may include production infrastructure and resources including workspaces creating the possibilities of the doings of a practice. Social-political arrangements prefigure the ways in which relating among people and objects in/of practice may occur (Kemmis et al. 2014). For instance, hierarchical arrangements within an organisation. Arrangements are entangled with practices and guide how practices unfold in a site in terms of the language used, activities of the practice in space-time, and the interrelationships between individuals and the broader world in that site (Kemmis 2022).

Adopting TPA as a way in which to understand work and learning therefore requires a shift to considering workplaces (as ‘sites’ of work), as intersubjective spaces of work, inhabited by workers practising amid the practice arrangements of the, rather than the more common ‘workplace’. Such a position accommodates changes experienced during the pandemic period. Taking a practice approach to work and learning through the TPA provides a wider canvas for considering work and learning that extends beyond the individual worker.

Learning and TPA

Attempts to define learning in the context of work have been multiple and contested, evolving over time to reflect changes in theoretical approaches to workplace learning. Hager (2011) has summarised these changes across three tranches of workplace learning theories; psychological, socio-cultural, and socio-material approaches. Psychological approaches focus on the individual learner, how they acquire knowledge and how knowledge is transferred to them where the dominant metaphors for learning are of acquisition and transfer (Sfard 1998). Socio-cultural approaches shift the underlying assumptions to incorporate the role of context in learning, acknowledging that there are broader influences on learning beyond the individual. Such approaches are reflected in the metaphor of participation, in proposing that learning at and for work, occurs through participation in that work (Hager 2008; Hager and Hodkinson 2009). The final tranche of theories are situated in practice and socio-material traditions, taking up metaphors of emergence (Hopwood 2016). Learning, in a practice sense, is an ongoing process of becoming that cannot be completely predicted or directed, influenced by individual dispositions as well as interactions with other people and material objects.

As a practice approach, the TPA is situated in the final tranche of theory, where learning is considered to be dynamic and the focus is not on the individual but on the practices as the unit of study. Across practice approaches, debates around what learning is and how it occurs persist. Schatzki (2017), for example, has maintained that practice approaches do not engender new conceptualisations of learning but instead that learning remains a process of knowledge acquisition. Within practice approaches, learning has also been positioned as coming to participate in practices (Lave 2019).

Within the TPA, learning has been described as ‘an initiation into other practices’ (Kemmis et al. 2014, 55) and as being ‘stirred in’ to practices (Kemmis et al. 2017, 45). More recently, Kemmis (2021) has argued that taking a practice approach requires rejecting traditional conceptions of learning as being the acquisition of knowledge and instead consider that ‘learning is a process of coming to practice differently’ (10) where learning is not a practice in itself but instead an outcome of participating in other social practices. Accordingly, learning is not something separate from practice, rather ‘learning happens in practices, and learning shapes and reshapes practices.’ (Kemmis 2021, 7). Moving beyond a view of acquisition of knowledge, this perspective understands learning as occurring in the performance of a practice through participation — through stories shared with others, through observing, listening, and questioning that is situated in the context of a practice and in the practice community. Kemmis (2021) extends the notion of situated ‘beyond some place, or in some “context”’ and maintains that adopting a practice view of learning allows for understanding learning as transformation not only of individuals who may be learning certain practices, but also those practices and the sites in which such practices ‘happen’ (12).

This article takes up Kemmis' (2021) argument about learning as coming to practice differently and applies it to a study of managers' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate the utility of this approach in helping reformulate our understandings of learning at and for work in times of change. These conditions not only raise a key question of how we think about the 'workplace', but also about how we think about learning.

Our Study

Our research adopts a qualitative approach, which is ontologically congruent with the TPA. The research sought to draw on the experiences of workers in managing roles from various workplaces in the Australian state of NSW during 2020-2021. Our focus was on understanding the ways in which manager's work practices were changing and how this enabled and constrained various forms of learning. Each researcher invited managers from their industry networks to participate in the research. Managers who expressed an interest in participating were selected for diversity on the basis of industry represented, working arrangements during COVID-19, and gender and family responsibilities. Twelve managers were interviewed from across a range of sectors including local government, construction, consultancies, NGO, pharmaceuticals, hospitality and food, transport and education. To preserve anonymity, participants were asked to nominate a pseudonym to be known by within the study.

Semi-structured interviews, with embedded elements of 'Interview to the double' (ITTD) (Nicolini, 2012) were used to collect data. Interviews began with open-ended questions to orient the participants and researchers to each other. These initial questions helped the researchers to develop an understanding for the participant's organisation and the scope of work and reporting relationships that the participants were involved in. Next the interviews

adopted the ITTD form. ITTD is an interview technique that has been used to uncover ways in which learning and knowing takes place as part of daily work practices (see for example Nicolini 2012; Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella 1998; Lloyd 2014; Sheridan, Price, et al. 2021). To dive deeply into the participants' daily work practices, participants were asked to imagine they were conducting a 'hand-over' to the researcher as though the researchers were a colleague that would be replacing them (i.e., become their double) in their job the next week. For example, questions such as "if I were to replace you in your role for the next week, how and what would I do?" The ITTD technique was particularly important as researchers were not able to visit the individual research sites, shadow participants or collect data via observations. ITTD thus enabled researchers to be brought into the participants daily work practices and to gather rich data about how their work unfolded across sites. The focus on daily work practice sought to surface how participants were coming to know how to go on in their practices and how learning was taking place (or not). The approach helped to surface not only 'embodied, practical knowledge by rendering it explicit' but also to access tacit knowledge as noted by Langley and Meziani (2020, 375).

Due to the public health orders and social distancing protocols which were in place at the time, interviews were conducted online using the Zoom video-conferencing platform and were digitally recorded (video and voice). Interviews were initially transcribed using the automatic Zoom transcription function. This was followed by a manual review of transcripts against recordings and corrections by researchers to any transcription errors. Following interview transcription, the whole transcripts were analysed in two phases using an iterative process involving alternating between individual analysis and group discussion and comparison of analyses. The first phase was a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) of the transcripts that involved iterative cross-referencing of data, analyses, and research

literature in order to identify patterns, themes and particular points of divergence and convergence between themes and stories emerging in the data. The second phase of analysis used the TPA as a frame, engaging with the Table of Invention (Kemmis et al. 2014, 226) to explore the practices and practice architectures for each site and identifying commonalities between sites.

Findings/discussion

We now present and discuss findings related to learning in the context of work that considers learning as coming to practice differently (Kemmis, 2021). The following sections explore evidence from the study through the lenses of reformed sites of work, shifting practice architectures, and learning as coming to practice differently. The evidence demonstrates the explanatory power of adopting a practice approach, specifically the TPA, as a way of understanding practices of work and learning as transformation not only of individuals who may be learning or re-learning certain practices, but also those practices and the sites in which such practices ‘happen’.

Reformed sites of work and reformed practices of ‘going to work’

In the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), as a result of public health orders designed to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection, various public health measures were put in place for extended periods of time. These measures included instructions to remain at home (‘lockdowns’), restrictions on travel, social distancing, and designation of certain kinds of workers (e.g., emergency services, health services, food and essential good retailers, transport and logistics, construction and other essential services) as ‘essential workers’ of ‘essential providers’ (Health and Human Services Victoria n.d.). Sites of work where

essential work was deemed to take place, implemented various new processes and procedures to minimise risk and protect the health and safety of their workforce and customers.

For managers such as Margot, who was working as a project officer in the construction industry and was deemed ‘an essential worker’, the practice of ‘going to work’ at her office was reshaped. For Margot and her colleagues ‘going to work’ meant learning how to engage with new and altered cultural-discursive arrangements —public health discourses around ‘contact with someone with symptoms’, ‘confirmed cases’, ‘close contact’, ‘PCR testing’, and medical lexicon about symptoms such as sore/scratchy throat, runny nose, loss of taste, fever etc., all of which proliferated and became embedded as part of a new ‘health self-assessment’ activity. As part of ‘going to work’ Margot told of how she and other members of her team all used a checklist and considered scenarios such as:

[My] throat, it's a little bit scratchy ... [does that mean] Covid symptoms? You may just have a cold or whatever? [Do I need to test for Covid?] go to [the] doctor... get a clearance certificate ... [Margot]

Margot and her colleagues also needed to engage with altered material-economic arrangements designed to minimise the potential risk of infection noting that ‘the office was reconfigured to allow for that 1.5 metre distance rule’ and adhering to the ‘four per square meter rule for meeting’ in order to ‘observe social distancing’. This change in material-economic arrangements and reconfiguring of the office also resulted in a shift in the socio-political arrangements, such as a:

... rotating roster, [Team A] 50 percent of the workforce would work remotely [after] thorough clean on the weekend... the other 50% of the workforce, [Team B] would actually come back into the office the following week. [Margot]

The grouping of workers and managers in two permanent teams meant Margot was now interacting in physical space and time with only half of the colleagues she would have ordinarily done so.

For other workers who were not deemed essential, different kinds of measures were put in place, key among them was the dissolution of the ‘workplace’ as a specific, and singular location, and the replacement of such with multiple spaces from which workers began working remotely either wholly or in part. Prior to the pandemic, the ‘workplace’, was, for many, a distinct site and a place where one went to ‘discuss’ and ‘do’ work and to ‘relate’ to co-workers and materialities. Almost overnight, the workplace, as it was previously experienced, became reshaped. For some the workplace as a distinct site vanished to be replaced by home offices, kitchen tables, and corners of bedrooms. The shift to working remotely was not necessarily a new arrangement for some workers who may have periodically worked from home prior to the pandemic, however the sheer scale, for example where ‘everyone was working remotely’ was for many unprecedented and driven by State and Commonwealth Government imposed health orders:

Government's direction came down, whereupon they said people had to be separated, you can't go to work, etc and then the pubs closed. At that point in time the decision was made that everyone had to work from home, so that's where all the office staff started to work from home, it was pretty much take a laptop work from home [Xavier]

Rapidly, the practices that constituted ‘going to work’ shifted and new and re-formed practices were required for managers, and their teams, to continue in their work roles and meet the goals of their organisations. In order to make this transition, employers made significant operational changes that went beyond simply a change in the physical location of where the work was being done.

For those managers and their colleagues ‘going to work’ meant learning how to engage with new and altered cultural discursive arrangements with the language and terminologies of technology now proliferating where going to work now meant ‘logging-in’. For example, Sally, a manager in a Human Resources Consultancy, talked of ‘Zooming’ and ‘sharing screens’. Similarly, Bob (a senior strategy manager) used the term ‘Teams’ not to refer to those groups of people who may have reported to him, but rather as a short cut term to refer to Microsoft platform Teams, used for teleconferencing and text chat with others and conversing with others in ‘chat rooms’.

The altered material-economic arrangements meant that managers needed to move into spaces in their homes that were often not originally intended as an office space and configure that space to suit their changed working circumstances, mediated by various technologies. This meant that, for some managers and their teams ‘going to work’ meant not even leaving their bedroom. Such changes were reflected in comments such as:

... they're moving straight from the bed to their desk, they're sitting there for seven hours... [others now are] simply going from the bedroom to an office at home, or to the kitchen bench... [Sally]

For these workers and their manager, who’s role previously required being ‘on the road’ visiting clients there was no longer a ‘need to travel [to client’s premises]’.

‘Going to work’ therefore meant a significant shift:

Pre-covid I would have been out the door by probably seven o'clock in the morning. Dressed ready to go... [Now] it is not uncommon for me or for any of my team to call

me at 8:30 and I'm still eating breakfast or waking up and then I'm slowly turning on my computer and getting started for the day [Sally]

The TPA provides a means of understanding such reformed sites and practices of work by considering changes in various arrangements and the implications these have had for practice and sites of practice. The notion of site as a location in the intersubjective space, provides a means of understanding locations of work, not as specific physical locations, though physical locations may be involved, nor as entities or things, though material entities and things may be involved, but as social phenomena, as ‘bundles of practices and material arrangements’ (Schatzki 2006, 1863) to achieve certain purposes, projects or outcomes. Thus, the notion of ‘site’ enables an understanding of ‘workplaces’ as contexts of work whatever and wherever they may be in time and space (Schatzki 2010) shifting discussions away from notions of ‘workplace’ towards a focus on practices and practice arrangements that vary according to the site and those participating in them, yet held together by the ‘projects’ of work.

Evidence from the study showed that, in the shifting sites of work there were significant changes in the practice architectures in terms of altered cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that, in turn, shaped practices of work and learning. The following section discusses the shifting practice architectures that were noted by the managers interviewed before moving on to consider more granular practice changes.

Shifting practice architectures

The movement of work practices from a common site for many workers to multiple sites, sometimes within a single home, resulted in a significant shift in the practice architectures in place around work, and other, practices. As noted in the previous section, during COVID,

sites of work were reformed and shared with sites of other, overlapping practices including the practices of other work sites in households where multiple people were working from home. This was evident in all of the interviews conducted. In this section, we discuss these changing practice arrangements and how they prefigured new ways of practising.

Changing cultural-discursive arrangements

New and altered cultural discursive arrangements permeated throughout the experiences of the managers interviewed. Public health and medical discourses and the language related to symptoms of COVID-19 proliferated for most of the managers. In the proceeding section, we discussed the case of Margot and the changes in language for her and her team with the introduction of health-related language such as ‘symptoms’, ‘social distancing’, and ‘confirmed cases’. Overall health and wellbeing of workers were also reflected in Sally’s comments that encompassed the language of public health orders to keep people safe but also referenced workers’ general wellbeing:

[We realised that] Covid was going to make an impact, with the restrictions on travel [and] social distancing ...[how this was going to impact] their mental health [and] positive frame of mind. [Sally]

Public health was not the only health discourse in play. The financial health of work sites was also at the centre of conversations. Managing the financial health of businesses during a period of unknown financial outcomes was reflected in the use of financial language to explain shifts in the availability of resources for previously well budgeted reward and recognition practices: For example, as explained by Sally:

[our] cash preservation with COVID at the moment [our] budget is completely gone for [rewards and recognition]... so you now are needing to brainstorm or Google

other ways of rewarding and recognising employee's achievement. So nowadays, instead of really giving out rewards, it's more giving a shout out in virtual meetings.

[Sally]

Similarly, both workers and businesses began to use the language of financial support. Some of our participants, who may not have been previously engaged with government support for their income, became familiar with “*JobKeeper*” (Australian Taxation Office), an Australian Federal government support package to keep employees and employers connected to their workplaces. Michelle, for example, worked in a not-for-profit organisation where people were confused about what the differences were between the terms ‘stand down’ and ‘redundancy’ and what these meant for them in terms of who was eligible for government support or not. Michelle spent a great deal of time explaining the measures while also needing to ensure the fiscal viability of the not-for-profit service that was suddenly unable to provide their usual face-to-face services.

Changing material-economic arrangements

For many, there was a complete shift in the material-economic arrangements, as managers became separated from their regular place of work for at least part of the time during lockdowns as workplaces were reconfiguring their operational practices and trying to remain viable businesses in challenging economic circumstances. This was the experience for Margot. She explained:

... when we were in [first] full lockdown I was actually stood down on JobKeeper... but that was me personally, I was stood down for approximately two months. Yes, I was stood down early May and came back to the workforce ... [with] transition back to the work around late June for two days a week, and then

in July... back full time five days a week, and that was full time back in the office.

[Margot]

Shifts in technology use were perhaps most obvious in the changed material-economic arrangements of the shift to remote working and the materiality of how people were required to interact and complete their work. Technology became a key enabler of both work and learning with meetings and training sessions moving into virtual modes. Workflows also moved online with a greater reliance on chat programs, email, and virtual collaboration tools. Technology needed to be configured into the existing practices of running team and other meetings, striking a balance between using the technology but not allowing it to dominate. Practices therefore needed to flex and evolve to accommodate the changed material-economic arrangements. The focus was on technology to facilitate work and learning and to change work practices to allow them to happen remotely, rather than become the main focus of activities.

Changing socio-political arrangements

Perhaps a less visible and more subtle change that occurred as a result of shifting the site of work relates to the socio-political arrangements, the ways in which our participants related to others individually and in teams. For example, Sally disclosed that she had to find:

... new ways to engage your team... before Covid you would have been traveling out to meet have a physical face to face [meeting]...with each of your team members once a quarter as a minimum. [As] part of their development and coaching... you would spend the day with them, you'd sit in on their meeting [with clients]...on site, walk around with them and they would usually go have lunch with them, have that really good interaction and build that rapport with your team... now you're lacking that rapport and constant team building ... [Sally]

In addition to dealing with clients and lack of travel, the changed material-economic arrangements of working remotely also shaped social-political arrangements and the practices of how teams worked together. As Sally noted, there was

... more expectation on the team as a whole to be collaborative and network with each other to brainstorm any of their problems and the solution [Sally]

In referring to her team all working from home and saving time on commuting, Sally further noted that her team had more time to collaborate on technical questions or problems that they were grappling with. She noted that:

... they're brainstorming utilizing the chat wall to have a chat with everybody because more people are available because everyone is pretty much in the same boat. [Sally]

Shifting the primary site of work from an office to the home was an important shift in the practice architectures that shape and prefigure practices, resulting in the reforming of work practices as well as the entwinement of work practices with practices already occurring at the new, blended sites of work. Overlapping sites of work and other practices, including the practices of other work sites in households where multiple people were working from home, were evident in all of the interviews conducted. In talking about their work practices, managers were compelled to also talk about their relationships with others and how practices were shaped and negotiated in their site. For example, in Michelle's household, herself, her husband, and her adult daughter were all working from home with her younger daughter studying remotely at university. The work and learning practices of the whole family intersected at the one site of the family home where negotiations and accommodations needed to be made as the family each negotiated a way forward for the practices that they were participating in and came to those practices differently. Similarly, in Noel's household,

both he and his wife worked from home initially with his wife taking the home office leaving Noel with the kitchen table. As Noel noted,

...I started to work from home and I just realised I just couldn't do it. When my wife goes into the office on the Thursday, I will work from home because it's the space and it's just the quietness I like, I have got to have that. [Noel]

The following section focuses on learning in these reformed sites of work and how defining learning as coming to practice differently (Kemmis 2021) offers deeper insights into how learning occurs through and for work when sites of work are multiple and blurred.

Learning as coming to practice differently

Throughout this article, we have taken a practice approach to work and learning through the use of the TPA. So far, we have discussed how sites of work became multiple and changed practice arrangements shaped reformed practices of work as well as other practices found in the home such as those of the household, relationships, leisure, parenting, and schooling. The TPA has allowed us a way in which to explore how practices were prefigured in similar yet also unique ways at each site of work and for each manager interviewed. In this section, we shift the discussion to look more specifically at learning and how conceptualising learning as coming to practice differently offers greater insights and explanatory power than traditional ways of discussing learning at and for work that tend to focus on the individual.

A key finding was that, through the process of working remotely, the managers interviewed came to an awareness of what they had lost in the transition and many things that were previously invisible or not in consciousness were revealed. Key among these was the recognition of lost learning and development opportunities along with incidental interactions with co-workers and the extent to which they helped to get work done, build and nurture

relationships, and spark learning. A number of participants noted that they felt that the incidental learning that previously occurred as part of a normal workday was no longer available but that they were very aware of this whereas previously it was not necessarily conscious. Lauren noted that opportunities to learn spontaneously and incidentally were not available while working from home. Lauren commented that:

The on-the-job learning, the learning by observing other people, or just hearing other people or just being around other people. We're not getting that anymore. So, I've learned the importance of human interaction.

In addition, Chloe noted that more structured opportunities for learning such as courses and seminars that would normally have been offered had been cancelled, reducing opportunities for learning.

At the same time as managers experienced what they saw as reduced access to learning than they were accustomed to, they were 'doing' learning because they were able to go on and come to know what to do in new and emergent practices, sites of work and ways of relating. This involved reforming one's work practices in line with the altered practice arrangements. For example, accessing and developing a range of skills and knowledges including how to use previously unnecessary or under-utilised technology, new rules and requirements for the business, and new ways to operate in a site of mixed practices. The necessity for local government employees working in 'outdoor jobs' to connect with each other led to the introduction of, and learning how to use, the corporate email system and other technologies such as Microsoft Teams. Such employees were previously excluded from these technologies however needed to use them to maintain a key practice in their everyday work as Lauren explained:

“... running toolbox talks differently because that's a really important part of how they work... they did toolbox talks by Teams [Microsoft Teams], Zoom... they learned technology...email.. which is actually a massive learning

Although not generally described as such, learning occurred for all the participants, often in difficult and stressful circumstances. It is not uncommon for workers to fail to identify participation in their everyday work as learning, as Lizier and Reich (2021) found in their study of office-based workers in Australia. As Margot noted, for many in her organisation it was a ‘very steep learning curve’. Participants described having ‘emergency’ meetings, and working together with other managers to ensure the ongoing operation of the organisations that they worked for, within the context of changed cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. Managers recognised that they needed to change or re-form their practices in response to the changed arrangements, in particular, being more intentional about checking in on their direct reports and the increased importance of taking a proactive role in monitoring and responding to employee well-being. Moreover, there was a recognition for many of the managers of needing to focus more on the outcomes produced by their team rather than how much time their teams spent working on a task.

Interactions in general required a greater degree of intention with managers working remotely finding that they needed to schedule meetings to discuss issues or ask/answer questions whereas previously these might have been solved simply by walking over to someone’s desk. This was both an enabler and a constraint. On the one hand, spontaneity was removed from interactions to a large extent and meetings may have taken longer than a casual chat in the office might have done. On the other hand, the managers interviewed felt that they had more control over their time and over interruptions which allowed for more concentration and time

to get work tasks done. What was interesting was that informal conversations were still happening (although somewhat confined to trusted colleagues) through such means as ‘back channels’ during virtual meetings where people could chat, comment, and sometimes vent informally away from the formal meeting using text messaging apps. What was missing from meetings that had been somewhat invisible before COVID was the ‘debrief’, the opportunity to make sense of what had happened in the meeting through an informal chat afterwards as people moved back to their desks or grabbed a coffee.

People new to their jobs during this time found such changed interactions particularly challenging as they did not yet have the tacit knowledge that one picks up through chance meetings and the opportunity to observe in-person interactions. For those new to organisations during COVID, they, and their managers, needed to be far more intentional about structuring their interactions when starting their new role to ensure that they met the people they needed to meet to get their job done. Xavier, who was new to his role during COVID also noted that:

I still, after 10 weeks, don't really feel like I know [the business] well and I'm relying on the interpretation of others, and as a result of that, one - people won't come and talk to me as much because they don't know who I am...[and] two - I can't come up with the right level of detail or the right proposals because I don't really know myself what goes on... you're far less likely to do a video link with someone that you don't know about, someone that you don't really know. [Xavier]

For new employees, it was not so much learning the technical aspects of their new role that was affected but their learning of organisational culture, language, workplace norms, and how to ‘go on’ in their job in terms of achieving their goals and realising their agenda and so

they needed to approach this with greater intention and planning than before COVID.

Moreover, as the quote above from Xavier illustrates, it was also just knowing who to ask when facing a problem or task requiring that organisational knowledge. Not having had the opportunity to build face-to-face relationships and to participate in the daily in-person workings of the organisation at a common work site impeded the development of this tacit knowledge.

Interestingly, many managers interviewed identified the changes they made to their work sites and practices as something permanent or semi-permanent that they would continue even after returning to ‘normal’. The majority of managers interviewed had little or no intention of returning to the office in a full-time capacity and preferred a hybrid arrangement with 2-3 days in the office and the remainder at home. In addition, there was a widespread realisation among the managers that they felt they could be more productive at home in terms of completing tasks while office time was subject to interruptions (some managers were starting to return to the office at the time of the interviews). Those that reported this realisation went further to note that they now saw their remote working time as their productive time to get tasks done including ‘deep work’ while they were deliberately organising their office time for relationship building and interactions. For example, Ken noted that:

...the downside of being in the office is I have a lot of people, after being here so long, who I don't work with, who I used to work with, who just want to stop by for a chat and that's a little bit frustrating at times. That's why I do like working from home on certain days where I have project work, where I need solitude. [Ken]

Such changes saw practices shift from an organisational focus on how time, space, and tasks were organised, to an individual one where managers took responsibility for what worked for them in terms of home, work, and life practices.

The need to maintain connection within teams and between managers and their workers emerged as an important work practice that needed to be approached differently, with a greater emphasis on support rather than task focus for employees. As noted earlier, many of the managers described ‘checking-in’ practices to ensure that their teams were coping during challenging times which included phone calls, scheduled virtual meetings, and, when permitted, coffee catch ups or walks, practices that evolved from established workplace practices such as dropping by someone’s office or ‘grabbing a coffee’. This also included a recognised need to ensure that teams remained connected and team members did not feel isolated. Managers also identified a need to develop their skills in leading virtual teams and adjusting their usual ways of working and learning to accommodate this. A key change in manager’s work and learning practices was becoming ‘OK with not knowing’ and being prepared to try different approaches, see other’s perspectives and learn from them in the flow of work – in short, coming to practice differently. This was illustrated by Lauren, reflecting on how she and others in her organisation were learning to ‘go on’ by learning adapt and adopt practices and drawing from previous experiences:

“... we got ‘baby bird’ questions.. ‘what do I do when the lift door opens and there are three people in there?’.. You would respond to the question with care and concern... and then say ‘seriously?’ [they are asking those questions]... because we were the opposite ... we [the executive] were making so many massive decisions every day... we were in the thick of it... and when you get someone with a really basic question that they should just know especially if they're a manager you kind of go [expletive]... then you remember that human beings struggle when they are

under a bit of stress...like the basic stuff becomes complex and not everybody is designed or prepared to lead in these kinds of big event...and this person maybe hasn't had experience to draw on... [I realized] I'm better prepared [because of leading the Council's] amalgamations... a massive change imposed on us... [it's]..knowing that changes aren't the end of the world. [Lauren]

Viewing the above examples of learning not as the actions of individual managers but as 'coming to practice differently' (Kemmis 2021) expands our conceptualisations of learning as being shaped by shifting practices and practice arrangements. Learning as something that does not occur as an event, but as an ongoing interaction of webs of practices and practice arrangements where the individuals are not learning skills and knowledge alone but where practices are constantly adapted and re-formed in response to the emerging practice architectures.

Conclusion

Using evidence from interviews with workers in managing roles, framed by the TPA, this article has highlighted how the changes to work for office-based workers wrought by COVID-19 require a reconceptualization of the idea of a unitary 'workplace'. Instead we conceptualise multiple sites of work where altered practice arrangements prefigured changes in work, and other, practices at the site. The managers interviewed responded by reinventing or integrating practices of work, leisure, relationships, caring responsibilities, and running a household.

In adopting the TPA, our approach has shifted the focus away from individual or organisational responses to the changed arrangements, to instead focus on the practices at each unique site of work where managers, their teams, and those they share their households

with are coming to be and do differently. The TPA was used to explore how workers in managing roles learned to practise their work differently in newly formed sites of work where work was not heretofore the primary function of the site. Such a shift then also requires a view of learning that rejects a focus on learning as defined by time, space, and process to instead adopt Kemmis' (2021) practice-based definition of learning as 'coming to practice differently' (3) where learning instead arises from some precursor practice, prefigured by webs of practices and practice arrangements. The managers, their colleagues, families, house mates, organisations, and communities interacted within changed practice arrangements and sites of practice to change, re-invent, re-form and negotiate practices anew, learning as they did so through coming to practice differently.

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