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## Research Reflections on the Positives of COVID-19 for Work in the Northern Territory

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### Abstract

Across Australia, COVID-19 has certainly disrupted our lives. For many researchers it has caused us to push the pause button on our activities and rejig our timelines, our methods and our ethics approvals to suit the changed conditions. As an educational researcher in the Northern Territory, my plans between March and July 2020 were thrown out the window as not only our borders were closed but our access to remote communities was suspended with additional 'biosecurity restrictions' which were designed to protect people living away from major centres, and who had limited access to health services. Not only were there limitations on travel, but many of the sites of my work, such as schools, were closed. Conferences were cancelled, virtual meetings became the norm and 'the office' shifted from the university to home. But it wasn't all bad, and in this short article I want to focus on the benefits of a year of COVID-19 and how I think my work—and the work of other researchers—will have changed forever as a result. These are personal reflections and I acknowledge that others' experience of research in a COVID-19 environment may well be different.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, technological inequity, remote research, adaptation, virtual engagement

### Introduction

I have lived and/or worked in the Northern Territory since 2003. I have lived in Alice Springs and currently live three kilometres out of the Darwin CBD. Most of the Northern Territory could be described as 'remote' based on ABS classifications, though geographical constructs of rurality and remoteness often originate in the metropolitan and come with other ascriptions such as 'disadvantage' (Guenther, Halsey, & Osborne, 2015). Many researchers (from what we in the top end of the Northern Territory fondly describe as 'down south') struggle to come to grips with are the distances involved in travel to remote communities, the costs of doing research, the challenges of working with people whose first language (even second) is not English, the lack of high-speed broadband, the weather challenges and the small number of flight options in and out of the main centres, let alone remote communities. But for me (originally from down south in Tasmania) these challenges are often what makes research exciting. So, to have all this threatened by a virus caused me to stop and think. Very quickly I reoriented my thinking away

from the frustrations of lockdown, to the opportunities it created. And in this article, I want to share some of those thoughts.

I should state at the outset that my optimism and hope were supported by a very supportive employer, which focused more on staff wellbeing than on the need to demonstrate some kind of false productivity. I'm grateful for that.

### **Space to Think**

At the start of the pandemic I, like many others, thought this would be over within a few months and we could all get on with life as usual. As March 2020 moved to April, May, June and July, it was obvious I was wrong. At first, I thought I had better do some planning and preparation with a view to looking beyond the pandemic. By April, I had done all the planning I could do and was forced into a space to think and reflect on how I could make the most of this time. For the first time in a long time, I began reading for both work and pleasure, rather than just for work. The space to think extended into the virtual world of online meetings, which became not only a point for professional and social connection, but also an, opportunity to reflect and engage in deeper conversations than would have otherwise been possible in a physical sense where meetings were cut short in order to allow for time to travel to the next meeting. Now, time for shared thinking was possible, because leaving and joining a meeting were as simple as clicking a button on the computer screen.

The space to think also allowed for opportunities to read and review journal articles and to make a positive contribution to those papers with considered feedback. The time also gave me more opportunity to engage with students who were writing their theses and to support them in that process. And there was time to devote to editorial tasks like producing special editions of journals.

### **Time to Write**

The space to think led to time for writing. The COVID year has been one of my more productive writing years as all the ideas that emerged from past research started bubbling to the surface of my mind and then started spilling out onto paper. The power of writing as a research method in and of itself (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2018) became equally clear to me, as I contemplated new methodologies such as 'thinking with theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018). The ability to theorize and philosophize in this time for writing also flowed more freely, but I would say that by August I was yearning for opportunities to get back out into the field and resume the work I love. Fortunately, that coincided with opening borders and the removal of biosecurity restrictions in the Northern Territory.

### **For Once, 'Remote' Wasn't a Disadvantage**

There was a sense in the online meetings I participated in, that we were all on a level playing field. For once, me being in Darwin was no impediment to participation—no one could meet physically, and for this time, we in the north could look on with some amusement as those down south grappled with shifting more towards a virtual environment. For once, everyone understood that it was important to include people who are online rather than assume that the only people in the meeting were those in the physical room. And as colleagues faced all sorts of mandatory restrictions down south, we in the north were relatively free to do what we usually do—with the exception of going down south!

## **A Spotlight on Inequities Faced by Communities**

During September, I was in the process of finalizing a research report on digital inclusion in remote communities (Guenther, John, Smede, & Young, 2020) when it struck me just how much the digital challenges of life in homelands and communities came to the fore during the pandemic. While our friends down south bemoaned the need to work in a virtual world, our friends in homelands and communities were still struggling to get reasonable access to the internet and didn't have the virtual or the physical alternatives that others have. As I went out to Mamadawerre and Kabulwarnamyo for data gathering activities, the teachers at school would comment on the fluctuating bandwidth—limited at times by cloud cover. Similarly, the options of telehealth being promoted down south were denied to those in homelands. This is hardly a 'wicked problem' as Corbett and Tinkham (2014) might suggest. This is a simple problem that is easy to fix with the will and some money. For example, on a drive up the Tanami Highway (aka 'Track') in 2018, on my way to Lajamanu I was astonished by the infrastructure that was installed near the Newmont Granites Mine site: 4G mobile coverage, an airport that accommodates jets and no shortage of resources for the people who work there. For me, the pandemic has put a spotlight on the externally imposed inequities that many in communities have to deal with—and this spotlight is a very good thing.

### **More Effective and Efficient Ways of Working for People in Rural and Remote Communities**

The uptake of platforms such as Zoom has created a demand for better ways of delivering research and education services. All of a sudden, lecturers were asking themselves how they can better engage students in an online environment. This is not a new problem, indeed it was an issue I was grappling with as a lecturer at a rural university campus in Tasmania, more than 10 years ago (Guenther & Johnson, 2010), but the pandemic has caused people who were previously reliant on face-to-face delivery, to rethink their andragogy, and this too I think is a good thing for students living in rural and remote contexts. The rapid development of platforms like Zoom and Teams for learning has resulted in opportunities for virtual engagement (e.g., through breakout rooms for small group chats) that are now becoming the norm in teaching, learning and research. All of a sudden, the assumption that you have to go to a place in order to work with the people in that place has broken down. Of course, virtual relationships will not be a substitute for personal face to face working relationships, but they do create a very real opportunity for extension and maintenance of relationships in meaningful ways that are both cost effective and time efficient. That has to be a good thing!

### **Conclusions**

In this article, I have deliberately chosen to focus on the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has affected my research practice. I am not blind to the havoc and disruption that it has also caused, particularly for those living in rural and remote communities where virtual opportunities for engagement with people are more limited and where physical disconnection from colleagues—particularly interstate and overseas—has at times been painful. However, I believe that the legacy of the pandemic for research and education will be positive, particularly for those of us who live a long way from metropolitan centres. It has highlighted the need for equitable access to technology, it has generated fruitful and creative solutions to longstanding problems and for some like me, the time and space it has created has been professionally and personally productive.

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