

Applied management and learning post-COVID-19: implications for managers and learners at work, beyond crises

This multi-disciplinary collection represents a response to a call for papers made in mid-2020 at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers a snapshot of differing responses to the various crises – acute and still unfolding – that have arisen over the past year, evidencing how this global emergency continues to wreak havoc with our understandings of long-held learning, work and management norms. The socio-cultural concept of “the workplace” has often differed significantly across industries, professions and geographical borders: the changing contours and definitions of “*work spaces*” now overlap much more significantly with home life, health, education and well-being. Rights issues have emerged or gained renewed traction against a backdrop of the various controversies and concerns of the past year, global and national. The task, for example, of bringing workplace learning and behaviours “in” to sites of higher education (HE) has presented sharp challenges for tutors and managers alike.

This is especially so in the wake of a global pandemic that has required a rapid adoption of the unfamiliar – social distancing, remote homeworking and online learning – on an unforeseen scale. The very notion of a discrete space for working or learning has been profoundly impacted, if not forever altered perhaps, by the acute need to manage repeated lockdowns and master new forms of connection with colleagues. Given increasingly difficult contexts of worker and learner isolation, HE teaching pedagogies have also been subject to seismic changes, particularly in relation to addressing some of the challenges traditionally associated with work-based tasks or “experiential learning” models.

Internships and work placements have, however, long represented a key means of enhancing students’ academic experiences and helping managers find the most able, resilient recruits. They can serve to offer HE students “appropriate levels of challenge”, and can frequently place the best learner-workers on transformative pathways, enabling meaningful “industrial” and professional links, and strengthening those symbiotic “communities of practice” that exist beyond the confines of the college campus. Whether working from home affords the same opportunities to evidence learning, or achieve graduate-level employability remains to be seen.

Clearly, increased competition for jobs may exacerbate the fears of learners and workers alike, especially where socio-economic disadvantage may already have been a factor. The impacts of predicted economic downturns are likely to be intensified by the effects of COVID-19, the scale of which has served to further highlight workplace precarity and indeed employees within certain sectors. The pervasive climate of anxiety, isolation, “screen-fatigue” and fiscal uncertainty has meant that managers, mentors and tutors have had to quickly devise innovative, collaborative strategies to support staff through a number of new alternative realities. Management in this sense has encompassed much more than the daily



administration of tasks, setting of targets or problem-solving; rather it has sought to address a wide range of new fragilities, fears or emotions that have beset learners and workers alike.

The papers selected for inclusion within this special issue include analytical works, original research findings, conceptual offerings and viewpoint pieces. They reflect the deep commitment of those who have been tasked with looking after others over the course of the past year: they touch upon key issues of social justice, gender, the need for resilience and collegiality, and the challenges of navigating new, sustainable forms of online “living.”

Put simply, the collection seeks to evidence how learning, working and perhaps above all, *managing* to remain connected to each other, might be best achieved in the face of sanity-challenging situations.

The collection will be of interest to those involved in applied management development and learning, as well as work-based learning in HE. All of the papers provide new methodological – as well as practical – insights into applied approaches to management which need to *manage* at the same time as dealing with *extreme conditions* of change.

Yet the special issue is also relevant to the fields of law and policy making: the right to access education, together with the right to work safely, both sit squarely within human rights frameworks as meaningfully juridical socio-economic entitlements.

The pandemic has thrown into sharp relief just how interconnected and overlapping such rights are: working and learning enable – or at least represent – the sort of freedoms that can in turn offer pathways to good health, fiscal security and a sense of identity. Indeed, some of our papers allude to the timely, yet “controversial and confusing” issue of workforce immunity testing, setting out the dilemmas and dialectics that it can create.

Thanks are due to all of these contributors for their valuable, original insights and rigorous methods of research and analysis.

We are indebted also to our peer reviewers who gave so generously and kindly of their time in these days of high anxiety and relentless uncertainty. We would like to thank the international team of guest editors who supported the special issue: Prof Benito L. Teehankee (De La Salle University, The Philippines), Prof Dwight Giles (University of Massachusetts Boston, US), Associate Professor Carol Ma Hok Ka (Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore), Prof Vinodh Jaichand (Walter Sisulu University, Eastern Cape, South Africa), Dr Christa Van Staden (University of the Free State, South Africa), Prof Dawn Bennet (Curtin University, Perth, Australia), Dr Jacinta Ryan (RMIT, Melbourne, Australia) and Dr. Dalton Tria Cusciano (Fundacentro, Brazil).

Alice Diver and Rachel Stalker