Delivering the discipline: Teaching geography and planning during COVID-19

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Abstract
COVID-19 has radically changed the higher education sector in Australia and beyond. Restrictions on student movement (especially for international students) and on gatherings (which limited on-campus sessions) saw universities transition to fully online teaching modes almost overnight. In this commentary, we reflect on this transition and consider the implications for teaching the disciplines of geography and planning. Reflecting on experiences at the Department of Geography and Planning at Macquarie University, we explore a series of challenges, responses and opportunities for teaching core disciplinary skills and knowledge across three COVID-19 moments: transition, advocacy, and hybridity. Our focus is on the teaching of core disciplinary skills and knowledge and specifically on geographical theory, methods, and fieldwork and professional practice skills. In drawing on this case from Macquarie University, we offer insights for the future of teaching geography and planning in universities more broadly.

Keywords
curriculum, fieldwork, methods, online teaching, pedagogy, professional skills, theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about COVID-19’s emergence as a catalyst for change, as a pivot to new ways of doing things, or as the beginning of a new normal. The pandemic has radically reshaped daily lives, including (and being not limited to) where and how we work; how we travel; our interactions with friends, family, and the wider community; the role and performance of the health care system; access to and experience of housing, public space, and social services; our impacts on the environment and climate change; and the structure and performance of the wider economy (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). In short, the impact of COVID-19 has been widespread, with few locations and individuals not adversely impacted.

The university sector is far from immune from these impacts. Indeed, COVID-19 is having significant impacts on the structure, performance, and vitality of the higher education system in Australia and beyond (Ross, 2020; Universities Australia, 2020a). Global travel restrictions implemented in response to the pandemic stopped the arrival of international students into Australia, revealing the sector’s reliance on this source of revenue, a strategy pursued in response to declining government funding (Marks, 2019; Marshman & Larkins, 2020). In 2020,
universities were restricted from accessing the Commonwealth Government’s Job Keeper scheme (targeted at keeping people in employment during the pandemic), and estimates suggest that as many as 21,000 academic staff could be made redundant and thousands of casual academic staff could lose work (Universities Australia, 2020b). At the same time, a restructure of domestic student funding was announced, flagging a significant increase in the cost of some degrees for students, especially humanities and social sciences (HASS), with Commonwealth support shifting to so-called “job-ready” degrees principally in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, despite evidence indicating the high employability of humanities and social sciences (HASS) graduates (Barnes, 2020; Bryant, 2020). It is clear that higher education in post-COVID-19 contexts will be very different from the period before January 2020.

In this commentary, we reflect on our experiences of teaching geography and planning at Macquarie University during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and speculate about the future of teaching these disciplines. The Department of Geography and Planning (hereafter the Department) was formed in the Faculty of Arts in 2015 following an institutional restructure. We teach undergraduate and postgraduate courses across the disciplines of geography and planning. In 2019, Macquarie University reviewed its entire curriculum, with widespread changes coming into effect in January 2020. Curriculum renewal through incremental change and wider structural reform is relatively common across the sector, but the rapid nature of this specific transition at Macquarie meant that most staff were developing and delivering new and reconfigured units in the time leading up to the pandemic.

To structure our discussion, we identify three “moments” as critical junctures in our experiences of teaching. We seek to avoid a narrative that describes a trajectory of experience before, during, and after COVID-19 and instead focus on particular periods which have shaped how we deliver learning and teaching content central to the discipline:

- Moment 1: transition to online unit delivery (March 2020—Week 4, Semester 1)
- Moment 2: advocacy for disciplinary skills/knowledges (May 2020—mid-semester 1)
- Moment 3: hybrid model for teaching (July 2020—immediately prior to Semester 2)

Although disciplinary colleagues’ experiences across universities in Australia and beyond are likely to vary from our own, our goal is to reflect on what COVID-19 means for teaching geography and planning in universities more broadly. In our discussion, we focus on core knowledges and skills, in relation to theory, fieldwork, and professional skills that lie at the centre of our disciplinary identity. We write as a collective of all members of the Department. We captured our reflections initially in weekly learning and teaching meetings and followed those with work in smaller writing groups on the topics of theory, fieldwork, and professional skills. Our discussion here is anecdotal and partial, yet we hope it resonates with colleagues working across the disciplines of geography and planning and contributes to ongoing discussions about what the disciplines are, how they are taught and what opportunities (as well as challenges) might arise in a post-COVID-19 higher education sector.

# Key insights

This commentary explores the challenges and opportunities of teaching geography and planning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key findings centre on the challenges of teaching geographical theory online; the implications of restricted methods and fieldwork training; the impacts of restricted student placements; and barriers to teaching professional skills. We explore these issues during the “transition” moment of COVID-19. In the “advocacy” and “hybridity” moments, our findings centre on the ways in which we can maintain disciplinary skills and knowledge in a rapidly changing university teaching environment, focusing on the core disciplinary skills and identifying opportunities for future teaching.

# 2 | MOMENT 1: TRANSITION

Moment 1 is the period immediately following the decision to close the University campus and transition all classes online. Macquarie announced a pause in face-to-face teaching midway through the fourth week of Semester 1 2020 to allow teaching to be transitioned to a fully online mode, a shift replicated across the sector in Australia and beyond. Macquarie has a long history of and commitment to online teaching, with many units delivered in both on-campus and fully online modes. This prevalence of online teaching is far from unique, with many universities in Australia offering at least some of their courses and units online (O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). However, this is less common in other countries with, for example, many universities across the
United States and the United Kingdom using online teaching platforms for the first time (Batty & Hall, 2020). Indeed, the shift to online teaching at universities such as Cambridge received considerable international media coverage (BBC, 2020).

Prior to the transition, around 60% of our units had online and face-to-face versions. Those units not offered online have specific learning outcomes that require face-to-face teaching. Most Department staff had some experience of online teaching (for example, Graham et al., 2017; McLean et al., 2019), so as a group we were perhaps better prepared for the shift than colleagues elsewhere. Nevertheless, this rapid shift, increasingly termed emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020), precipitated multiple administrative, regulatory, and pedagogical processes and reconfigurations, many of which disrupted the disciplinary learning and teaching practices across our units. Here we reflect on this disruption in the context of the teaching of geographical and planning theory, fieldwork, and research methods and professional practice skills. Our discussion focuses first on those areas where the least disruption was experienced and proceeds to those that were most disrupted (Figure 1).

Our geographical and planning theory units often experience challenges related to student engagement and participation. Urban planning is a vocationally oriented degree, and many students see theory as being abstract and of little relevance to their future employment or their everyday lives (Cresswell, 2013). Thinking Space (a third-year unit) is designed to offer an advanced introduction to theory in planning and geography, delivered via face-to-face teaching. From the outset, we were challenged with the task of bringing theory to life in the classroom in ways that engaged students and provided them with the opportunity to experiment with different theoretical perspectives, connect them with their own lived experiences, and apply them to spatial contexts, past and present. Prior to the pivot online, the unit ran in an active learning classroom (tables with a media pod, seating up to eight students), with a mix of lectures, applied activities, tutorial discussions, and groupwork. This experimental, co-constructed, “hands-on” approach was disrupted and negatively affected by the transition to online teaching. A group media assessment based on observational field research in Sydney was redesigned with students instead producing a digital storytelling project (a podcast, a video presentation, or “The Conversation” style blog). Overall, geographical and planning theory is core to the discipline, and the particular nature of this knowledge makes it difficult to deliver online without considerable additional time and effort.

Professional skills, including interpersonal, communication, and reflective practice skills, are core components of the geography and planning curriculum and typically have relied upon in-class teaching. One mode practised in Environmental Justice in the Anthropocene (a third-year unit) uses team-based learning (TBL) to build group decision-making skills (Michaelsen et al., 2002). Designed as an in-class activity, students take an individual quiz before discussing the quiz in small groups and re-entering group answers. The teacher goes through the answers with class members, who can appeal and defend particular answers. When the campus closed, the TBL activity moved online with students using online discussion forums and student-initiated videoconferencing sessions to debate and finalise group answers. Not only did TBL keep students engaged with one another and the unit teachers at regular intervals, but the groups became more functional and organised over time, reflecting the development of important online skills in communication, negotiation, and decision making. Such skills are likely to be increasingly important and this COVID-inspired shift to online TBL will be continued and further developed.

Reflective practice is another key professional skill. In Environmental Decision Making (a postgraduate unit) students experimented with changes including being vegetarian, buying “less stuff,” avoiding single-use plastics, or connecting with nature and drew on a change experiment developed by Leichenko and O’Brien (2020). By reference to a series of weekly questions, students were prompted to share their reflections in personal blogs as well as in group discussions. This activity was fairly resilient to the rapid shift online. An online forum replaced in-class discussions and built a sense of solidarity among students as they struggled with sticking to their changes amid the turmoil associated with the pandemic. Students drew on their reflections to submit a “reflective journal of change,” which captured their thoughts on the practical, political, and personal dimensions of change (O’Brien, 2018) and also revealed their anxieties of living through a pandemic and their considerable economic 

![Diagram](image-url)
and social disparities. The task, which can be effectively delivered in-class and online, allowed students to draw on reflective practice skills to consider how personal and structural factors both enable and constrain environmental action.

Research skills are a critical part of disciplinary training. Teaching research skills successfully requires students to have conceptual tools as well as the capacity to put their skills and knowledge into practice (Crooks et al., 2010; Keenan & Fontaine, 2012). Such issues become more challenging when the “classroom” transitions away from a physical space to an online learning environment. In Theory and Methods in Human Geography (a second-year unit), students were asked to undertake research activities at home and collect data through online surveys, telephone/video conference interviews with other students, and photography at home instead of our originally planned on-campus research activities (namely field-based participant observation, interviewing, yarning, and multi-sensory data collection). Although students were provided with the resources to undertake such research activities, these replacement tasks conducted online did not sufficiently meet the learning outcomes of practical skills development. Transitioning on-campus research activities online in a short timeframe was not optimal for student learning but nonetheless opened up opportunities to rethink how we undertake research and look beyond traditional methods of teaching research skills.

The most disruption was experienced in those units that included fieldwork and work-based placements. Fieldwork is a distinctive pedagogy that sets the discipline apart (Lloyd et al., 2015; Phillips & Johns, 2012). As such, fieldtrips are common in geography and planning to introduce students to the human scale, the felt experiences of place, and the value of accounting for a multiplicity of visual, olfactory, and auditory perspectives. A fieldtrip is immersive, challenges assumptions about how places are used and understood, and offers a fresh perspective on an apparently familiar subject. Fieldwork is embedded across our curriculum, and ranges from small group field trips to a residential field school. Yet COVID-19 significantly reconfigured the potential to undertake fieldwork activities away from campus. For example, students in our planning units are required to interact with or encounter the city and experience the planning and regulatory processes which shape urban space. In Planning and Development (a second-year unit), students normally attend local planning panel meetings, but an alternative fieldtrip involved students observing those meetings via webcasts. Although the essence of matters submitted to the panel could be noted, the wider meeting dynamics (including room layout) could not be observed.

Another example emerges from Introducing Environmental Humanities (a first-year unit), which has a focus on interdisciplinary more-than-human approaches (O’Gorman et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2012). One assessment required students to keep a journal to record their interactions with a non-human “mate.” The task relies on students having stable access to places and species throughout the semester. Yet, many students experienced radically different and indeed shifting or unstable geographies. For example, one student initially not granted access to Australia first observed socio-ecological engagements with mosquitoes in Thailand and then in Australia after she was allowed to return. She compared the different species and approaches to these insects as possible vectors of disease in these places. Other students focused on “mates” around their homes, rather than on-campus. There were new learning opportunities as students were able to examine key concepts from more angles that enabled them to better appreciate the deep entanglements of cultures, geographies, and their “mates” in multi-sited encounters. However, these changes were necessarily reactive and make-shift, and in-depth discussion about underpinning concepts was not possible.

Core to our planning degrees are work-integrated practice units that meet work experience requirements mandated by the accrediting body, the Planning Institute of Australia. In Planning Experience (a fourth-year unit) students complete 175 hours of work experience in a professional planning workplace, including planning consultancies and local and state government. Supporting students in these placements always involves a degree of uncertainty, but this was amplified by COVID-19 as planning organisations also entered lockdown, requiring staff to work remotely. Some students were able to complete their placements by working from home, undertaking tasks independently and liaising with placement supervisors via email and videoconferencing. Other students were unable to complete their placements, and alternative “in-house” placements were developed to focus them on strategic planning work as part of a staff-led research project. This workaround increased staff teaching workload and added to the emotional work needed to manage student expectations as their workplace experiences shifted.

Placements are an important pathway to employment, with many students gaining their first planning position because of their professional placements (Dowling & Ruming, 2012). The online transition meant that some students missed the opportunity to expand and develop their professional networks. We offered digital networking opportunities with the Planning Institute of Australia, consulting firms, and public service planning organisations to allow students to broaden their contacts.
Nonetheless, students who worked from home on a university-led project were not exposed to the tacit knowledge learned by engaging in a professional planning workplace.

Overall, then, beyond requiring staff and students to address the challenges and responses associated with individual units, this moment generated significant additional workload and stress. The transition to working from home revealed the precarious and diverse characteristics of home-based working (Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). Prerecording lectures or moderating online discussions were among the range of teaching activities mediated by the multiple social and material assemblages of home, including home schooling because of school closures in New South Wales, limited computer literacy skills, and poor internet connections, all of which sometimes meant recording lectures in the early hours of the morning (the only time of day when the internet connection was adequate) or in wardrobes (the only quiet space in the house). Likewise, our students faced a range of social, cultural, economic, and technological challenges and differentially engaged with online classes; that is a critical point but beyond the scope of this current commentary. The teaching experience was vastly different from the traditional face-to-face format, which has been vital in teaching core disciplinary knowledge and skills.

However, this first moment also strengthened our existing sense of collegiality and dedication to teaching geography and planning. This collegiality was fostered in weekly online learning and teaching meetings which, while updating staff on current university regulatory, procedural, and technological developments, emerged as fora in which we could collectively confront the challenge of fully online teaching, develop our own professional skills, and generate collective solutions. Few changes outlined above were initiated and undertaken in isolation and instead were products of collective discussion.

3 | MOMENT 2: ADVOCACY

Moment 2 in our narrative reflects an initial opportunity to advocate for the discipline. Responding to the relaxation of lockdown measures in New South Wales, some limited opportunities for on-campus teaching were provided for Semester 2 2020. The prevalence of an existing culture of online teaching informed Macquarie University’s decisions about a broad expectation that all units could be taught online. As such, initial plans for on-campus teaching required special approval, and we needed to make a case that particular forms of face-to-face teaching were fundamental to the delivery of our core disciplinary skills and knowledge.

The examples regularly mobilised by the University were science units, where specialised lab equipment was required. Beyond the sciences, we were among a small number of disciplines whose staff argued that on-campus teaching was fundamental and that special dispensation was required. Approval was not sought for all units; however, cases were made for two units centred on core geographical and planning skills. The first was the Geography and Planning Field School (a second-year unit) originally designed as a regional residential field trip. In its new iteration, it would be delivered on-campus but still meet learning outcomes in terms of students demonstrating achievement of practical skills. Prioritised, too, were planning studios for Planning and Design, a fourth-year unit that draws together practical skills and knowledge taught across of Bachelor of Planning. Planning studio pedagogy is a student-centred, collaborative, problem-based pedagogy based on a real-world project and is a unique, valuable learning and teaching method used to educate novice planners (Bosman et al., 2016). It was challenging to deliver the planning studio for Urban Strategic Planning (a third-year unit) that was delivered online in Semester 1. To undertake an online evaluation of campus courtyard plans, students used surveys, video conferencing, polls, and interactive online drawing tools, but the results were not as effective as they have been using face-to-face interactions. As such, staff found it was critical to make a case for on-campus teaching to allow students to apply technical, research, and problem-solving skills in practice.

During this second moment, we finalised arrangements for our professional practice units in Semester 2. For both Planning Experience and Practicing Human Geography (a third-year unit in which geography students complete 100 hours in work-related tasks), we shifted to online-only placements and a consultancy model to support students without internships. Students were set up to work with external clients on projects ranging from school zone traffic best practice to the design of conservation clauses in planning instruments to preparatory work for proposed developments. Although this consulting model provides less direct exposure to employers, it compensates by provoking greater skills development in collaboration with peers. Challenges remain to ensure that students value their experiences and embrace the validity of online work by grappling with the logistics of flexible work practices and to recognise that their experiences may point to future work practices.

Overall, whereas teaching responses in Moment 1 were mostly reactionary and involved responding to the
reality of lockdown and campus closure, Moment 2 offered opportunities for a more considered approach to teaching. This approach required us to identify and articulate core disciplinary skills and knowledge and navigate institutional approval processes to convince the University that particular forms of on-campus teaching were essential to the discipline.

4 | MOMENT 3: HYBRIDITY

Moment 3 reflected our response to a decision by the University to deliver a hybrid mode of teaching (a combination of online and on-campus teaching) in Semester 2 2020, a decision made possible because of relatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases in New South Wales in preceding months (Baker, 2020). In this mode, all lectures remained online, and small-group on-campus teaching was permitted, while a fully online version of most units remained available. Made two weeks before the start of semester, this decision required rapid decisions about how to teach units in both synchronous and asynchronous modes and also to address logistical challenges in terms of rooms, timetabling, and student enrolment.

Most immediately, Moment 3 reflected a period of considerable uncertainty. Staff members had to be flexible and teach with a “Plan B” in mind. A rapid switch from face-to-face to online teaching might have been required to accommodate community risk if Sydney locked down or if staff and students needed to self-isolate at short notice. Health and safety concerns remained paramount, and warranted that staff implement social distancing protocols across diverse teaching spaces. Online and physical teaching spaces needed to be managed fluidly and relatively interchangeably to allow our teaching practices to be resilient.

Nonetheless, there were opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of theory and its real-world application in our teaching practice. For example, Borderless Worlds (a third-year unit) engages directly with border studies, both historically and in critical contemporary contexts. Ongoing closures of Australia’s national and state borders under COVID-19 were unexpected (and now core) additions to the unit, and involved reflecting upon the largely unprecedented characteristics of such closures and their impacts upon local communities and daily life, as well as upon the role of borders in managing pandemics and other health-related issues. The direct relevance of borders and immigration controls to many students’ lives allowed the connection of related theories in border and refugee studies to be drawn much more clearly.

Similarly, Introducing Human Geography (a first-year unit) aims to convince students of the relevance of geography both for major social, political, and environmental events and also for understanding the textures of everyday life in critical ways. It also seeks to dispel any lingering notions students may have of geography as a descriptive, uncritical discipline. COVID-19 has provided a rich geographical imaginary for communicating this message. Consider the all-pervasive idea of social distancing (and the muddled geographical thinking behind that notion, given that what we practice is physical distancing out of a sense of ethical obligation or social proximity). Or think about the reinvention of professional and social life through digital interventions that operate through the folding of relational space. In both such cases and others, COVID-19 has made practical, and often critical, geographers out of us all.

Professional skills development has presented a distinct challenge during this pandemic period as interpersonal skills are arguably best learned with the teacher as a coach (Schön, 1987). Environmental Impact Assessment (a postgraduate unit) explored how negotiations done face-to-face involve the development of tacit knowledge about how moving closer and further away reflect shifts in stance or viewpoint and about how the organisation of a room affects how negotiations happen. Negotiation via video conference was more challenging because body language cues are much less accessible. However, with increased use of videoconferencing, students need skills in negotiating in both media. Teaching that embraced flexibility as an opportunity, moving back and forth across delivery modes, aligned with these new professional realities.

Fieldwork remained an ongoing challenge in this period. Approval to run the Geography and Planning Field School on-campus allowed students to put research skills into practice. Nonetheless, rapid institutional changes required by COVIDSafe plans, which required separate approval for on-campus research, and changing COVID-19 circumstances in New South Wales, meant that considerable uncertainty remained. In such circumstances, the significance of virtual fieldtrips becomes perhaps even more pronounced. The use of digital technologies as a supplement to, or replacement for on-site fieldtrips has been in development for some time (Stainfield et al., 2000). One institution, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, forms the basis of a virtual field trip in Tourism and Heritage (a third-year unit). In it, students have explored both the virtual tour provided on the Museum’s official website and the site’s representation in visitor Instagram posts to analyse the Museum’s heritage management and status. Although it is impossible in that virtual fieldtrip to replicate the
sustained multisensorial engagement and bonding experiences gained in traditional fieldtrips, the accessibility and alternative critical perspectives offered by strategic use of digital platforms should encourage geographers and planners to view virtual fieldtrips as an alternative approach to the fieldtrip rather than a direct substitution.

The teaching of specific disciplinary skills in fieldwork also remained a challenge. A first-year unit, *Sydney and the Great Australian Dream*, usually seeks to provide a history of mapping within the discipline contrasted with critical and countermapping approaches as students develop a people's guide to Sydney (Pulido et al., 2012). Fieldtrips to conduct countermapping exercises in collaboration with local community organisations were not possible so students engaged with community-led mapping initiatives using podcasts, websites, and publications. Connecting these concepts of mapping and countermapping to a community level for now must be postponed or, at best, conducted individually by students in their local government area.

Overall, this hybridity reflected an immediate challenge but also a longer-term trajectory with both opportunities and challenges in terms of delivering the discipline. Through this period, many staff continued to experiment with new teaching approaches, and collegiality remained important and manifest in regular teaching meetings.

5 | CONCLUSION: DELIVERING THE DISCIPLINE

In this reflective commentary, we have identified three “moments” as critical to delivering geography and planning curricula during COVID-19. In drawing conclusions, we do not attempt to generalise to all forms of online learning and teaching across the discipline but rather reflect on insights across these moments and consider some broader implications for teaching core disciplinary elements of theory, fieldwork and research methods, and professional skills.

Across all parts of the curriculum, COVID-19 has challenged our teaching practice. Although we were relatively prepared because of our previous experiences of online teaching, the rapid transition meant it was not possible to deliver all elements of the curriculum in the ways in which they were intended, and different forms of online teaching necessarily emerged in response. Overall, this rapid transition to online teaching—in the form of emergency remote teaching—is significantly different from online education that has been carefully designed over a longer time period. In this context, “making do” and experimental practice have been key and are still part of the status quo in the current situation of uncertainty.

Such practices of “making do” comprise activities that can be delivered at short notice to provide students with the skills they need, albeit in a far from ideal context. While making do, our decisions have been underpinned by a desire to promote inclusivity and equity and support staff and student wellbeing in acknowledgement of the precarious situations that have emerged from the pandemic as well as the inequalities associated with online teaching (Lederman, 2020). Nonetheless, maintaining student engagement in such circumstances is challenging, particularly when a move away from face-to-face teaching and physical learning spaces can limit the potential for active learning (Pawson & Poskitt, 2019). Furthermore, the rapid transition to online teaching could only be facilitated by staff taking on significant additional work on top of already challenging academic workloads.

Overall, some elements of the geography and planning curricula could be transitioned more easily than others. Teaching both theory and professional skills was possible with some adjustments, and more time will enable ongoing adaptations to learning activities and assessments. In contrast, fieldwork and placements were significantly affected and could not be delivered. New opportunities emerged nonetheless. For example, although students’ experiences in planning placements were not the same online as they had been in person, they could engage with new digital skills that may be equally or more relevant in a rapidly changing world.

There is scope to engage with elements of the pandemic directly in our disciplinary teaching practice, perhaps once there is a degree of perspectival distance from the virus’s most immediate impacts. COVID-19 has far-reaching implications and can be read through key concepts relevant to geography and planning (Dodds et al., 2020; Sparke & Anguelov, 2020), and can highlight the relevance of geographical and planning theories and practices to students. Geographers and planners have longstanding commitments to address issues such as responses to disasters, community resilience, and inequalities—all of which should be reflected in our current and future teaching practices. Nonetheless, the emotional labours involved in learning and teaching about the pandemic while experiencing it first hand should not be underestimated (Corbera et al., 2020). We write this commentary as a collective effort to document our experiences but do so in the context that staff and students continue to encounter diverse forms of risk, precarity, and vulnerability because of COVID-19. Any decisions to teach directly about the pandemic must be carefully balanced with concerns for wellbeing. In addition, it is
crucial that teaching about COVID-19 does not “crowd out” other significant issues such as climate change.

It is likely that future research practice across geography and planning will incorporate more digital and remote methods. This shift has implications both for how, as geographers and planners, we design and undertake research and it also makes it imperative to look beyond traditional methods of teaching research skills and fieldwork. The “digital turn” in geography has wide-ranging implications for the disciplines (Ash et al., 2016), but current circumstances mean that rather than simply adding digital methods to the content of units, the focus should instead be on teaching methods or fieldwork in digital environments. It may be essential to reimagine how discipline-specific research and fieldwork skills can be put into practice in a new teaching environment in the longer term.

Debates about the place of online teaching in geography and planning will be accelerated in response to COVID-19. In this context, there is a need to carefully consider the opportunities and challenges of online teaching and the ways in which hybrid approaches may be appropriately implemented (Wilson, 2008). It may transpire that “emergency” remote teaching becomes the default delivery mode moving forward. The question that remains is not whether COVID-19 will emerge as a catalyst for long-term changes in how we teach geography and planning but whether, how, and to what extent we can manage and adapt to these changes both pedagogically and institutionally. For example, in Moment 2, some parts of the curriculum were necessarily privileged over others, namely, fieldwork and planning studios, which points to the fact that, because of the pandemic’s wider institutional and financial implications, decisions about future teaching will not be made on pedagogical grounds alone. Given such institutional challenges, there is an opportunity to protect our disciplinary identity through our teaching practice.

Overall, although we were challenged and significantly stretched in terms of workload, in some respects we were also well placed to cope with and adapt to the crisis. The forms of improvisation adopted provide an opportunity to experiment and reimagine how the disciplines’ curricula can be delivered. Indeed, as a Department, we have had explicit discussions about many taken-for-granted aspects of our teaching practices that have acted as triggers for us to think about new and innovative teaching practices which may continue in the future. At the time of writing, the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on higher education in Australia are unclear. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the pandemic has forced institutions and staff in academic disciplines to address challenges around education that will have far-reaching consequences.

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ENDNOTES
1 For Geography and Planning, this comprised changes to the established Bachelor and Master of Planning and the introduction of five new majors: Geography; Human Geography; Urban Studies; Refugee Studies; and Environment, Society and Law.
2 The main academic year runs from February to November. Semester 1 runs from late February until end of June, and Semester 2 runs from late July until end of November.
3 In NSW, the Sydney and Regional Planning Panels aim to strengthen decision making with regard to regionally significant development applications (DAs) and certain other planning matters.

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