RESEARCH IN OTHER FORMS: CONVERSATIONS, ARTICLES, REPORTS ETC.

Museums and the Pandemic, One Year On Some Reflections on Academic Resilience

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Written as notes from the field, this article explores the overlaps between researcher development and the idea of academic resilience within the museum and heritage studies community. During a climate of uncertainty and rapid change, it argues that alongside the academic literature, positive psychology methods transfer well into the researcher development space. Methods involved informal email conversations with museum and heritage practitioners united by how COVID-19 and border lockdown presented new opportunities to connect, share ideas, and rethink. Presented as short narratives, these findings show how researchers and practitioners in northern Europe, the United Kingdom and Canada share similar concerns to those in the southern hemisphere about climate change, equity, well-being, resilience, and sustainability. These narratives highlight the importance of encouraging critical engagement, finding ways to traverse time zones that build international networks and provide leadership opportunities for researchers at any level.

■ **KEYWORDS:** academic resilience, coronavirus pandemic, museum & heritage studies, researcher development, sustainability, uncertainty

Border closures due to the coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the importance of encouraging critical engagement and fostering international collaborations. One year on, with travel plans still halted, the museum and heritage studies community found other ways to traverse time zones and engage in research collaborations. These notes also highlight ways to develop academic resilience.

These notes stem from my practice as a university researcher developer and as *Museum Worlds* reviews editor. The academic development scholarship frames what researcher devel-

opers do, and explains what academic resilience means. It also explores two ideas emerging from researcher development praxis. The first is “care as a strategy” in the ways developers go about their development work (Sutherland 2018: 270). The second idea relates to building “adaptive resilience”—which academic developers Sue Tangney and Claire Flay-Petty describe as skills as well as ways of thinking to help researchers navigate their way through uncertainty and rapid change (2019). In addition, the academic development literature examined shows how communities of practitioners prove critical to fostering researcher development; they stimulate ideas, offer peer-to-peer support, and mentor those interested in developing their leadership skills (Kinchin et al. 2018; Tangney and Flay-Petty 2019). While most academic development scholarship focuses on new and early academic career researchers, more so than on mid-career academics, these field notes argue that purposeful researcher development is worthwhile at any level.¹ Using *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* as a case study community, this short piece reflects on how the journal, which has a global focus, engages a vibrant international research community in critical dialogue. Methods involved short email discussions with a few thought leaders in the museum and heritage studies community about their research one year into the coronavirus pandemic. The results, curated into five stories, capture adaptive academic resilience as a skill set and a praxis. Taken together, these stories provide useful insights to help the museum and heritage studies community bounce together toward a new normal.

Background Context: *Museum Worlds*, an Incubator of Ideas

The theme of academic resilience builds from a body of work published in *Museum Worlds* exploring cultural resilience, starting with a Special Section on the Aftermath of Cultural Heritage Disasters edited by Sheila K. Hoffman, University of Massachusetts, Lowell (2019), which focuses on “public action and reaction” that followed the Canterbury earthquakes (Cobley 2019b) and fires that destroyed the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral (Poulot 2019) and the National Museum of Brazil (Brulon-Soares 2019). Hoffman concluded that while there was no simple answer to how to address the destruction of important cultural heritage sites, unified by grief, communities actively engaged in discussion about the significance of cultural heritage (2019: 202).

This was followed by “Museums in the Pandemic: A Survey of Responses on the Current Crisis” (Cobley et al. 2020). Respondents from Canada, China, France, South America, the United Kingdom, and Aotearoa New Zealand offered insights—as museum directors, consultants, activists, curators, educators, academics—into “cultural resilience in action during an extraordinary time” (Cobley et al. 2020: 112; McNaughton 2020). COVID-19 amplified the social function of museums. The contributors reframed the meaning of safeguarding heritage and reaching out to communities (Cobley et al. 2020: 113). However, this crisis has not yet ended as of this writing. One contributor, Professor Anthony Shelton, Director of the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia, thought *Museum Worlds* should ask the same contributors to write follow-up notes “on the continuing impact of COVID on their institutions and the field more generally. Such follow-up would be a useful document tracing the evolving effect of the pandemic on museological thought, cultural resilience, and museum operations.”²

Likewise, another contributor, Professor Bruno Brulon-Soares of Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil wrote, “I think this collaborative format, with responses from around the world, is very good for an international publication.”³ He also expressed interest in expanding this global conversation about cultural resilience. Comments such as these from busy professors indicate support for short format, rapid turnaround publications. Further

encouragement from Professor Kylie Message, ANU, Australia, and Professor Conal McCarthy, *Museum Worlds* co-editor, resulted in an invitation to curate a proposal for an edited book tracing the evolving effect of disasters like the pandemic and other extraordinary climate change catastrophes on museological thought and practice.⁴ This is just one example of how the *Museum Worlds* community fosters researcher development, incubates ideas, and stimulates debate.

While putting the book proposal together, I started reflecting on the various email conversations with researchers. What emerged was how COVID-19 and lockdown presented new opportunities to rethink museum and heritage studies; it also provided an opportunity to reflect on the importance of researcher development within this community during a climate of uncertainty.

Holistic Academic Development and the Researcher Developer

The academic development scholarship provides useful background information about what researcher developers do, and how to define academic resilience. For example, in a survey article, David Baume, the *International Journal for Academic Development* founding editor, determined three focus areas emerging since the 1990s: 1) academic developers themselves; 2) academic development as a field of study and practice; and 3) academic development in action (Baume 2016 cited in Sutherland 2018: 261). Kathryn Sutherland, who wrote this survey article, also observed that most academic development literature focuses on supporting teaching and learning at the institutional level. However, she thought that the academic development project could be more “holistic” and support research, leadership, and service (Sutherland 2018: 261).

Researcher development is a recent field of practice and research; extending conceptions of academic development. Researcher developers focus on building researchers’ academic career skills—developing academic resilience in relation to their research—whereas *research* developers support researchers with funding applications and stakeholder engagement (Sutherland 2018: 264). Most researcher development focuses on PhD students and early career academics (Sutherland 2018: 264); or on understanding national research assessment frameworks (Cobley 2019c; Oancea 2019). Mid-career academic development is another emergent research area; mid-career academics are the largest higher education sector group, and require purposeful career development to help manage conflicting demands (Tangney and Flay-Petty 2019) and avoid burnout (Campion et al. 2016). This piece, however, focuses on how informal communities of practitioners develop researchers beyond their institutions. It also takes a holistic approach to researcher development, encompassing all researchers at any level (Cobley 2019a).

Within the university context, the pathway into researcher development is similar to that of academic developers; they arrive from other disciplines (Kinchin et al. 2018). This brings diversification in styles and methods (Little et al. 2018). As background, I arrived into researcher development with expertise in museum professional development, museum education, and history teaching. Most academic—and researcher—developers remain research-active within their original research communities, while also brokering or translating those skills and knowledge “as they work in their institutional or national contexts, and determine how to act within it with integrity” (Little et al. 2018: 324). Furthermore, academic—and researcher—developers adopt a research-led praxis to support their development work, and these diverse disciplinary approaches foster resilience within the field (Kinchin et al. 2018; Tangney and Flay-Petty 2019). Similarly, researcher developers can share their skill expertise within their original research community.

Nurturing Adaptive Academic Resilience

Academic developers Sue Tangney and Claire Flay-Petty (2019) describe resilience as a mindset and a skill set that helps researchers grow and develop their academic identity during a climate of great change and much uncertainty. Resilience is a temporary state, over a finite period, whether six months or two years. The goal is to help organizations, people, and communities “bounce” as a means of adapting to the new normal in a timely manner. According to museum consultant Sarah Dowd (2018), adaptive resilience is a journey toward a longer-term goal of sustainability. Stories are central to adaptive resilience, the ability to adapt to change.

Arriving into academic development with an interest in academic resilience, I noticed that researchers seeking work-life balance, “grappling with writer’s block” or under pressure to produce quality academic writing within a short space of time, benefitted from advice offered by meditation teachers or life coaches just as much as from other researchers. As an example, I incorporated some useful tips from Jody Shield, meditation teacher and intuition coach, into “Developing Your Five-Year Research and Engagement Plan” training. These tips are:

Tune in ... Help move the idea forward.

Fuel up ... Do something that lights you up, weekly.

Slow down, don’t speed up ... Focus, give the idea time to form (Shield n.d.).

Shield reasons that you need breathing space to “see” or understand the energy of the idea more. However, for researchers one further and important skill step is required: *Share your ideas* with a community of practitioners, because engagement provides opportunity for new interpretations to emerge.

Academic developer Helen Sword, in *Air & Light & Time & Space* (2017), draws on a community of practitioners who share their stories to inspire other researchers to write well. This curated collection illustrates academic resilience in action. Sword understands that writing up research is a complex process requiring artisanal skills, disciplined work behaviors, collegiality, and collaboration. Yet these findings suggest that all researchers must learn to adopt a sustainable praxis (Sword 2017; Tangney and Flay-Petty 2019).

Data and Methods

These field notes draw from my experience as a *Museum Worlds* reviews editor and my practice as a university researcher developer since 2018. The roles started around the same time. Serving as a reviews editor provides an opportunity to foster other researchers within the museum and heritage studies framework, and I transfer these experiences into my “researcher-led teaching” (Kinchin et al. 2018: 340). Having my own research stories gives credibility when working with other researchers (Kinchin et al. 2018).

In October 2019, I was invited to read Sutherland’s 2018 *International Journal for Academic Development* editorial piece challenging academic developers to think more broadly about their practice, then to share my reflections about researcher development at the New Zealand Universities Academic Development Symposium (Cobley 2019a). All who attended the symposium supported the concept of holistic academic development. What caught my attention was the ethos of “care as a strategy” emerging from new research into how academic developers *do* development (Sutherland, 2018: 270). Furthermore, as COVID-19 disruptions still play out, interest in research about care and wellbeing in the museum and in heritage studies literature has also increased (Morse 2020; Jang and Mennis 2021). Between January and June 2021, I reflected on

the overlaps between researcher development and academic resilience within the museum and heritage studies community. Methods involved identifying a few thought leaders in the museum and heritage studies community and then, in May 2021, reaching out across time and space to have an email discussion about their research ideas one year on into the coronavirus pandemic.

Inspired by ethnographer Laurel Richardson, I selected excerpts from these email discussions, deciding what was significant, and reshaped them into narratives (1990). I draw from these researchers' everyday life experiences as a means to create a collective story. Richardson reasons that humans create meaning by crafting narratives, and creating a collective story (tribal, group, institutional) allows interpretations and new understandings to take shape. The individual is still a central character; yet most significant are the transformative possibilities in the collective story ... *you are not alone* (Richardson 1990). Humans, after all, are social beings.

Findings

The five short stories that follow demonstrate the temporary state of academic resilience in action one year on into the coronavirus pandemic. Together these stories provide hints about what long-term sustainability might look like for the museum and heritage studies community. Narrative themes include bouncing forward, wellbeing, sustainability and climate change, recovery, and equity.

Due to the personal nature of the first two stories, the need to preserve individual researchers' confidentiality influenced the decision to use pseudonyms. With permission, stories three, four, and five explore fresh ideas from named museum and heritage scholars operating in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden. As a collection, these stories feature researchers each tackling their real-world problems and offering new approaches in relation to their research.

Story 1: Reflecting on Geographical Differences and Digital Inequity

One year into the coronavirus pandemic, Ursula was busy learning to speak a new language, and doing some volunteer work in the heritage sector. Our email correspondence took place in May 2021. While living under lockdown restrictions in Europe, Ursula reflected on the differing lockdown experiences between Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia where she once worked:

Since moving to [Europe] in early 2020, I have watched the impact of Covid-19 on museums and heritage places from the sidelines. I wonder if there is scope to acknowledge geographical differences, in that museums in Australia and New Zealand have not been closed for as long as institutions in the northern hemisphere. Does this mean Australia and New Zealand do not have the challenge of having their visitor bases eroded away in a way that might take longer to bounce back than Europe will?⁵

Ursula raises important questions about how museums and other cultural organizations bounce back from the coronavirus pandemic and the mid- to long-term impact on visitor behavior. Will visitors return, and when they do, how long will they stay and what type of visit will suit them best? No doubt, a number of mental and physical barriers to visiting museums will need to be addressed to make visitors feel welcome and safe (Hollander 2020). This will involve new ways of thinking about social distancing in physical spaces like museum buildings, exhibitions and outdoor spaces, and food and gift shop design, as well as adopting new technologies (Billock 2020).

Ursula, who has worked with heritage sites and properties, thought lockdown had highlighted regional digital inequities within the sector:

Then I was also thinking about all the amazing places that have gone online—a lot of World Heritage properties, and perhaps generally the ones with the resources to do so. I see places like Heritage New Zealand, without the technical know-how and in-house skill to really embrace virtual tours and letting people into heritage from their computers, so that is interesting too. It would be interesting to see if the virtual provisions will continue when heritage places physically open up again to people.⁶

During the lockdown, museums increased their online presence as a means to connect to their communities. Staff digitized collections, offered virtual tours, curated online exhibitions, created home-based educational resources, hosted panel discussions and produced podcasts and other live content (Cobley et al. 2020; Network of European Museum Organisations 2020). For example, Heritage New Zealand's podcast, *Aotearoa Unearthed: Archaeology for Everyone* (Historic Places Aotearoa 2021) provides good content, using modest resources. However, the technology required for virtual tours is too expensive for most museum and historic sites, and the long-term allure for visitors accessing digitized collections, virtual talks, tours and demonstrations is still unknown.

Story 2: Why We Need to Pause, Tune in, and Reflect

Around the world, borders closed as a result of the pandemic. The global tourism industry paused. Universities, museums, and world heritage sites restricted access, and staff teleworked where possible. The international student market stalled and museum and heritage studies teachers re-thought course delivery and the way they conducted research. Pieter works at a university in a European Union member country. In mid-May 2021, I emailed and asked if he would be interested in joining an edited book project. In his long and careful email reply, Pieter described his current research-world challenges: “‘New research’ is not really a possibility right now (I cannot even get in to my work office/dept without special permission and a 72-hour ‘Corona-Pass’ from the regional health authority, let alone head off and visit museums for research!).”⁷ After expressing some hesitancy, Pieter then moved on and considered his options: “I’d like to be involved in this, and have been trying to think about how I can engage usefully (within the timescales envisaged, and within C-19 restrictions etc.).”⁸ Within the email, as he tuned in, gave himself time to focus, new thinking emerged. I saw how Pieter bounced his ideas forward and found a workaround: “Anyway, here are a few thoughts, typed as I go (so, SORRY for the typos and rambling nature of this), reflecting on what sort of ‘story’ I might be able to develop, and drawing out a few issues as I see them.”⁹

Travel restrictions had a noted impact on this researcher; Pieter, like many academics, had migrated to work, and one year on he was missing his family “back home,” 1500 kilometers away.

So ... I could string something together ... BUT: I won't have time to do very much NEW, both due to Covid, and due to not enough time (and if I do manage to get time and am able to travel, I'll try and visit some family—I have seen no-one in a year or more now! ... you can probably tell!) ... but, considering that I have just written about 1500 words on various musings that are related, perhaps I have got something worthwhile that would work??! I don't know—have a think and get back to me!¹⁰

When comparing the incredible freedom which I was experiencing in Aotearoa New Zealand, I felt humbled learning about how the C-19 restrictions Pieter faced had affected his research and wellbeing over the past year. I felt we were both enriched by this exchange, which allowed new interpretations to emerge.

Story 3: It's Bigger Than Just the Virus

In 2020 and 2021, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) expressed concerns about the museum and heritage sector's resilience. The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) also undertook a survey on the pandemic's impact in Europe, raising concerns that, for museums already at risk, COVID-19 might be the catalyst forcing those organizations to close (ICOM 2020a; Network of European Organisations 2020). Looking ahead, ICOM started encouraging the wider museum and heritage sector to reflect on "what was different" as a result of the pandemic crisis—and the cataclysmic economic, social, political and cultural knock-on effects that were just about to unravel—while moving forward into a new "business as usual" (ICOM 2020b).

I shift my focus now from Europe to Canada, where Anthony Shelton provides a perspective as a university museum director in British Columbia. Directors think about budgets, planning, operations, strategy, and leadership, which means navigating the museum and its staff through an uncertain and fast changing world. What does this new business as usual look like? Moreover, what indicators can reveal whether an organization or staff is resilient? On 31 May 2021, Professor Shelton was just about to step down from his role as director and getting ready to go on sabbatical. In his email he shared his thoughts about activist museology and resilient operations:

Operations would be an important part, but I would also like to look at other responses too. I think the pandemic for us ... was only one aspect of a wider crisis that hit us at the same time, including the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, Asian racism and our attempts to help ensure the preservation of the collections of the Museum of Memory, Kabul, against the Taliban's threats. All these can be seen as symptoms of common environmental and social upheavals, that have moved us from a critical to an activist museology.¹¹

Shelton, along with many other museum and heritage studies researchers, understands that to make museums and heritage sites fit for the future means engaging in critical discussion about the changes needed now. "I am beginning my sabbatical in a month's time, but had to abandon plans to divide my time ... so am not quite sure where I will find myself. Regardless, I'm going to spend the time revising some of my museology articles."¹²

Story 4: Researching Recovery, as a Process

During lockdown, many museums started collecting COVID-19 ephemera. Two researchers, Dr. Nuala Morse, University of Leicester, United Kingdom, with Associate Professor Celmara Pocock, University of Southern Queensland, Australia, who explore the idea of museums as safe zones, engaged in a Zoom discussion across time zones in June 2021. In their email correspondence to me, they thought it was still too soon to know how museums would use these collections.¹³ However, they saw opportunities for museums to work with public health workers, social workers, and community leaders to facilitate wellbeing through storytelling (Morse 2020), as stories help communities bounce forward into the next massive-change event. Morse and Pocock will continue their discussions, and co-write a reflective piece on "recovery as a process."¹⁴

Story 5: It's Time for Fostering a New Kind of World Heritage

This last story summarizes work undertaken by Professor Cornelius Holtorf and colleagues involved in the UNESCO Heritage Futures Project based at Linnaeus University, Sweden.¹⁵ In *Seeing the Woods*, a Rachel Carson Center blog post, Holtorf and postdoctoral fellow Dr. Annalisa Bolin reflect on how the pandemic intersects with ongoing challenges associated with climate change, and observe that heritage professionals and museums of the future will need to adapt to multiple crises (Holtorf and Bolin 2020). Published in May 2020, Holtorf and Bolin's blog post predicted a change in research direction, with renewed interest in wellbeing, recovery, and sustainability. Furthermore, they expressed concern that closed borders had helped some governments justify "already-existing trends towards the centralization of executive power," leading to increased circulation of xenophobic ideas, further restrictions on citizens' movements, and even putting "global peace at risk" (Holtorf and Bolin 2020). The authors urge mutual international cooperation between the museum and heritage community, reminding us that "we are all part of an interconnected humanity" and proposing "a new kind of world heritage," one that reaffirms the interconnectedness between humanity and planet earth (Holtorf and Bolin 2020; Holtorf 2020a, 2020b). Change can also happen at a local level, within the museum and heritage community, by sharing thought pieces and by linking research collaborations with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Holtorf 2020a, 2020b).

Conclusion: Bouncing Together, Toward a New Normal ...

A year ago, while recovering from a severe chest infection, I had reason to pause and reflect on my research world. In between naps, I compiled "Museums in the Pandemic: A Survey of Responses on the Current Crisis" (Cobley et al. 2020). Contributors reflected on their COVID-19 situation, each responding to the short-term, the here and now, creating space for new thinking about cultural resilience to percolate. These notes also explore the theme of museums and the pandemic, focusing on academic resilience. In this piece, contributors' stories reflect on the mid-term impact of the coronavirus in relation to their research worlds. Even though opportunities to undertake any new fieldwork were limited and sabbatical plans needed adjusting, the museum and heritage research community was adapting and was keen for critical engagement. In conclusion, I offer two points to consider. First is the importance of fostering collaborations; this involves reaching out to a favorite author, asking for introductions, and building a new community of practitioners. By sharing ideas, telling stories, and posing new questions, we can bounce forward, across time and space, into a new normal. Second, there is great appetite within the museum and heritage research community to challenge the status quo, and prepare for a radical, sustainable future.

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NOTES

1. The boundary between early and mid-career is blurred, although seven years is often used to differentiate between new and emerging and established; see Tangney and Flay-Petty 2019.
2. Email correspondence with Anthony Shelton, 12 September 2020.
3. Email correspondence with Bruno Brulon-Soares, 16 September 2020.
4. Email correspondence between Kylie Message, Conal McCarthy and author, 18 December 2020.
5. Email correspondence between author and discussant using the pseudonym Ursula, 19 May 2021.
6. Ibid.
7. Email correspondence between author and discussant using the pseudonym Pieter, 27 May 2021.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Email correspondence with Anthony Shelton, 31 May 2021.
12. Ibid.
13. Email correspondence with Nuala Morse and Celmara Pocock, 21 June 2021.
14. Ibid.
15. Readings shared by Cornelius Holtorf in email correspondence with author, 18 May and 24 May 2021.

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