



## Martial Arts under the COVID-19 Lockdown: The Pragmatics of Creative Pedagogy

### *Artes marciales bajo el bloqueo de COVID-19: la pragmática de la pedagogía creativa*

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#### Resumen

Las organizaciones de artes marciales combinan cada vez más actividades en la vida real y actividades en línea para cultivar cualidades, habilidades y virtudes específicas. Los estudiantes e instructores usan blogs, foros de chat, videos y podcasts para complementar su cultivo propio y compartido, algo que se ha extendido con el cierre del COVID-19 en Gran Bretaña. Las escuelas de artes marciales han cerrado temporal o incluso definitivamente debido a las medidas gubernamentales para controlar las interacciones físicas de las personas a través de medidas de distanciamiento social. Este artículo se basa en estudios de caso de dos escuelas de artes marciales británicas (Taijiquan y Esgrima Histórica) para examinar cómo se han adaptado al encierro. Mediante estos estudios de caso, se narran los desarrollos de cómo los maestros y sus comunidades locales han dado soluciones creativas durante este momento de crisis internacional, desde sesiones de capacitación en vivo dirigidas por instructores y conferencias hasta foros de chat dirigidos por estudiantes y sesiones de "noches de cine" para una sociabilidad continua y construcción de identidad. Para ello, este artículo hace uso de las siguientes teorías sobre las artes marciales: Cultivo compartido (Jennings, 2010) y Creación marcial (Jennings, 2019) para explicar cómo los artistas marciales continúan desarrollándose a través de esfuerzos creativos en línea y a través de sus cuerpos en movimiento dentro de los límites de sus hogares. Finalmente, sostengo que este cultivo creativo de artes marciales durante la pandemia de COVID-19 podría extenderse a una cultura física más amplia.

#### Abstract

*Martial arts organisations increasingly blend online and offline activity in order to cultivate specific qualities, skills and virtues. Students and instructors use blogs, chat fora, videos and podcasts to supplement their self- and shared cultivation, and this expanded with the COVID-19 lockdown in Britain. Martial arts schools have been closed and even disbanded while governments control people's physical interactions through social distancing measures. This article draws on case studies of two British martial arts schools*

*(Taijiquan and historical fencing) in order to examine how they have adapted to the lockdown. It offers these case studies to narrate the developments of how teachers and their localised communities have been creative during this moment of international crisis – from instructor-led online, live training sessions and lectures to student-led chat fora and movie nights for continued sociability and identity construction. In so doing, this article makes use of martial arts theories: Shared Cultivation (Jennings, 2010) and Martial Creation (Jennings, 2019) to explain how martial artists continue to develop through creative online endeavours and through their moving bodies within the confines of their homes. Finally, I argue that this creative martial arts cultivation during the COVID-19 pandemic might be extended to wider physical culture.*

### Martial Arts, the Lockdown and Pragmatism

Importantly, we should examine sport actions related to COVID-19, as there are important lessons to be learned. Certainly, when the next pandemic comes (which it will), we are better prepared in sport and society.

(Parnell, Widdop, Bond and Wilson 2020, 6).

The above quote, from what is an already well-cited position article by Parnell et al. (2020), is a pertinent request for research projects on the recent and ongoing impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the broad notion of 'sport' operating within globalised, networked societies. Shortly after, *Sociología del Deporte* released its first issue devoted to sociological reflection and debate on this problematic scenario for sport and related practices (Moscoso, Sánchez, Piedra and Villanova 2020). For example, Moscoso-Sánchez (2020) highlighted the paralysis of sport in Spain, noting the closure of small and medium businesses devoted to sport, the risk to sporting careers yet the increased use of home exercise equipment. Likewise, Piedra (2020) showed the vital role of social networks such as YouTube and Instagram for adapting to new circumstances. He cited global celebrity trainers' largely good practices of stimulating physical activity and accruing more followers during the pandemic.

Elsewhere, research has also considered the concepts of physical activity and leisure. For instance, sociologists have started to examine the experiences of practitioner-researchers of physical culture in how the lockdown has shaped gendered and aged bodies. Spanish scholar González-Calvo (2020) shares his autoethnographical accounts of the lockdown routines with his family, including physical exercise and hygiene in an effort to share good practices to-

gether. The home confinement enabled him to reflect the mediated, societal images of the athletic male body and the negative connotations of being a "middle-aged man" with a slowly changing, softening body. In Australia, Fullager and Paradis (2020), meanwhile, have explored the lockdown from a feminist standpoint, highlighting the potential for the historically gendered and repressive site of the home to be one of rich potential for leisure and work-life balance during these trying times. Drawing on a figurational sociological perspective on the social reactions to pandemics, Malcolm and Velija (2020) demonstrated how a focus on individual fitness and bodily control was being assisted by online fitness gurus. They outlined the constraints on group activities through the following regulations in the British context:

The UK Prime Minister combined the announcement of the country's lockdown (22 March) with the launch of the slogan, 'Stay Home: Protect the NHS: Save Lives'. While lockdown entailed restrictions on daily movement and freedoms that were unprecedented in peace time, exercising outside - once a day 'on your own or with members of your household' - was cited as a valid but exceptional reason for leaving one's home. The only other reasons cited were to buy essential items (food or medication), care for others, and attend work (although employers were encouraged to facilitate home working where possible). Exercise was given this exceptional status due to beliefs about physical and mental health benefits, but other popular places to exercise, such as gyms, leisure centres, swimming pools, and sport clubs, were forced to close. The decision to allow exercise outside of the house reflects the elevation of physical activity in contemporary western societies, particularly the success of campaigns to position exercise as a form of medicine.

(Malcolm and Velija 2020, 30).

Operating within this collection of activities of “sport”, “exercise” and “physical activity” come the martial arts, which possess their less regulated and transient forms of networks ranging from informal weekend training partners to intercultural Kung Fu families. Martial arts operate within a plethora of pedagogies ranging from crowded halls of Taekwondo students to underground ‘indoor’ students of more esoteric styles. Pedagogies are normally face-to-face, although online and distance courses are now becoming more popular through accessible forms of Taijiquan (Brown, Jennings and Sparkes 2014) and the use of YouTube to share specialist skills workshops from many masters to many students in arts such as Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (Spencer 2014). These activities are normally far less regulated and governed than the mass gatherings in the sport of football such as the multi-city mega-event of Euro 2020 that British researchers Parnell et al. (2020) concentrate on. British martial arts organisations had to adapt very quickly under these months of continued lockdown and physical distance, apart from those martial artists such as couples who live together and who were thereby able to train in the usual painful and intimate manner to develop the specific martial habitus in question (cf. Brown and Jennings 2013). The close contact required of the martial arts, in which sweaty bodies often collide into and merge with one another, means that they require careful monitoring during and after the lockdown. Early writings on this topic from Jiu Jitsu researcher Andreucci (2020) in Brazil suggest ways in which martial arts instructors and gym owners might be able to monitor body temperature and engage in regular self-testing for the Coronavirus. He advocates private lessons to slowly return to martial arts teaching and to maintain some level of economic stability. Meanwhile, turning to the case of Germany, Körner and Staller (in press) indicate how the turn to online platforms for teaching self-defence and police control techniques might be the way to utilise the lack of physical contact between teachers and students.

So far, these international writings on COVID-19 and sport remain quite understandably short and suggestive, being commentaries written within a short period of time rather than articles based on a great deal of original empirical data. They are normally informed by theory of some sort, however, as they pertain to fields such as sport studies and men’s and women’s studies. Instead of fixed definitions on things such as ‘sport’ and ‘martial art’, Bowman (2017) has advocated the development and use of theory in the newly established field of martial arts studies. This might include global theories of humanity, local theories and specific theories on the martial arts them-

selves. Pragmatism is one approach to theory that can contribute to knowledge on how people can deal with moments of crisis in creative new ways. Shilling’s (2008) work on bringing the philosophical tradition of pragmatism demonstrates ways in which previous habits can come into use during specific moments of crisis experienced in the body in which people must develop creative ways to overcome them. Later, drawing on the philosophy of Dewey, Shilling (2019) stressed the importance of body pedagogics as the multitude of ways in which people can learn to adapt to their environmental conditions. Applying this tradition of pragmatism, when combined with Mills’ (1959) vision for the sociological imagination (personal troubles and public issues), I recently developed the Theory of Martial Creation (Jennings 2019) to show how and why a pioneering martial artist might create a new martial art. This drew from three case studies of regionally, culturally and historically situated martial arts such as Bruce Lee’s 1960s vision for *Jeet Kune Do* in 1960s California, contemporary Mexican *Xilam* and *Bartitsu* in Edwardian-Victorian London. I argued that crisis was the key stimulant for the inception and continued creation of these martial arts, as the personal troubles of the founders met with the social issues of their life and times to stimulate them to invent a new fighting system to deal with such issues of identity, self-protection, ethnic and national pride and personal expression.

This crisis is both social and personal, and the creativity that follows the inception of a martial art is often characterised in distinct phases as can be seen with other long-term processes such as informalisation from the late nineteenth century (Wouters 2007). The rapid change in manners and emotional expression in specific Western societies has continued in sports and physical cultures such as jogging in the USA and the immense growth of MMA as a sport and spectacle appealing to the release of emotions and quest for excitement (Sánchez García 2019a, 2019b). Following Woulter’s (2007) figurational analysis, one can note that *Bartitsu* developed during the Victorian-Edwardian era of the 1890s which saw increasingly relaxed differences between the social classes in which the upper middle class “gentlemen” felt the need to defend themselves from the working class muggers or “ruffians” of the day. *Jeet Kune Do* stemmed from its prototype in Bruce Lee’s own Jun Fan Gung Fu as stimulated by new phases of social interaction and self-expression due to the counter-culture of the 1960s. *Xilam* continues to develop as a more formalised and registered business with its own created rituals and etiquette aiming to directly develop the personalities of its practitioners and through

this, indirectly influence the structure of Mexican society.

The slowly evolving Theory of Martial Creation certainly has room for development in terms of its examination of phases of crisis and creativity. It followed my PhD thesis, in which I proposed a framework for Shared Cultivation (Jennings 2010). Expanding on ideas from the Japanese philosopher Yuasa on Asian approaches to the body and self-cultivation (Yuasa 1987, 1993) through sociological concepts, this theory envisaged the martial arts not just a solitary or solo activities for exemplary individual flourishing, but for the development of a diverse range of interconnected practitioners and even the transmission and growth of the actual martial arts in question along interpersonal institutional and systematic levels. In short, a martial artist does not develop alone, but through their training partners and teachers who in turn benefit from the enhanced skills and insights of their students in both the formal and informal dimension of pedagogy, which ranges from private lessons to informal weekend bouts of sparring and specific bodily exchanges seen in the Chinese martial arts. As in Brown and Jennings (2013), I identified three ideal-typical ways of engaging in the martial arts as fighters, martial artists and thinkers, which might change over time as the practitioners develop along their shared journey of practice and discovery.

With this prior theorising in mind, the aim of this article is to document the ongoing, shared pragmatics of two specific online martial arts pedagogies during the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions. The lockdown restrictions themselves are specific to societies, nation-states and even regions, and these limitations for social life have emerged in distinct phases. At the time of this article being in press, the author is entering a second period of local lockdown known as a "firebreak", which is distinct to Wales. This followed the national lockdown from which the four-month netnographic data was gathered. As this is a new, ever-changing and increasingly challenging scenario, the nature of the article is exploratory, descriptive and open ended, allowing the reader insights into creative approaches from martial arts instructors, their students and members of their households in order to continue developing their martial artistry as well as physically, mentally and emotionally cope with the isolation and monotony of the lockdown. The study is based on two ethnographic projects in Wales in the United Kingdom, but I hope some of the online activities, which range from film nights to circuit training, might interest leaders and advocates of communities interested in keeping physically active, connected and joyful during these difficult and uncertain times.

### Flipping the research project online

Much talk in academia involves planning for a 'flipped classroom' as teaching goes online while our lives are significantly altered in terms of social distancing and the management of space. The same goes for me and the martial arts. As with González-Calvo's (2020) account of his life as a Spanish husband and father during the lockdown, my worldview and experience is driven from my own positioning, location and embodiment. Like almost all martial arts scholars, I am also a practitioner – perhaps a pracademic of sorts. But I am a white, middle-class, English, male academic in his mid-thirties who has been practising various forms of martial arts since 1998. In recent years, I have initiated a dual ethnographic study of one internal martial arts school and a historical European martial arts (HEMA) academy in Wales which seeks to examine their linguistic pedagogies and the interconnection between textual and embodied forms of knowledge. This study involved my apprenticeship from October 2018 in both establishments as a novice student learning the arts alongside a range of diverse people with different skills, abilities and interests. The research was theoretically inspired by the recent ideas of Di Paolo, Cuffari and De Jaegher (2018) around the notion of humans as linguistic bodies: how language is the bridge between experience, action, interaction and knowing the world.

This apprenticeship entailed twice-weekly classes for both Taijiquan and Neigong and HEMA. This was the first stage of what seemed to be a clearly planned five-year project involving interviews, focus groups and video analysis. However, as Plows (2018) reminds us, ethnographies are invariably "messy" affairs that reflect the chaos and unpredictable nature of life. Midway through the fieldwork stage of my research project came the pandemic, which halted my regular training in class and my emerging set of face-to-face interviews with the instructors and their core followers. This enabled me to focus on the more digital aspects of the martial arts organisations, including their Facebook groups, private message fora and conference calls for general discussions, theoretical lectures and social gatherings. Taking heed of Back (2007), I was able to 'listen' to the group in a different way than our customary bodily exchanges, and present their stories that might otherwise be unheard of. Also following Billig's (2016) calls to social scientists in terms of the stylistics and focus of academic writing, I therefore focus on the actions of people and their relationships with one another rather than more abstract theoretical concepts and noun compounds (such as my notion of 'shared cultivation') that I had

originally planned in my proposal. This paper is therefore representative of a pragmatic approach to the what's, how's and why's of martial arts instruction and sociability under the lockdown.

The thematic analysis reveals the currently ongoing case studies of two distinct and unrelated martial arts schools: 1) A Chinese 'internal arts' school specialising in Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) and Neigong (health, healing and spiritual training) and 2) a historical European martial arts (HEMA) academy focusing on the medieval Italian tradition. They form the primary local case studies in Wales as they are part of my ongoing dual ethnography on the linguistic pedagogies of these associations. The research projects have been approved by the Cardiff Metropolitan University's social science ethics panel (Sta-1148), while the unexpected ethical dilemmas brought by the pandemic include feelings of isolation, mental health and body shaming, which were purposefully unrecorded in order to respect the privacy of the group discussions and the non-invasive nature of the original research proposals. However, inspirational ideas on body parts from specific fitness and meditation sessions that I explore shortly have been included as inspired by Bates' (2019) analysis of the meaning of such anatomical structures during long periods of illness. All names are pseudonyms that reflect the nature of the groups and the regions in which they operate.

The lockdown led to a slower pace of writing than I am accustomed to, but the eventually write up corresponded to a more mindful approach considering my embodiment in an attempt to find my own authentic voice alongside those that I am representing (Herring 2007). Instead of conventional ethnographic approaches to thick description through the medium of impressionist, confessional or realist tales (Sparkes 2002), I have used short quotes from the speech to correspond with description of social actions across a four-month period. The final representation is therefore a broad picture of how martial artists have creatively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through their intertwined pedagogies and sociability – an inseparable political and educative relationship that Pedrini, Brown and Aimini (2019) found with *boxe popolare* (left-wing grass roots boxing) in Italy. This article presents two case studies of the aforementioned martial arts schools within their own subsections, and is deliberately lengthy and descriptive, for the range of activities and initiatives taken by the teachers and their students and supporters is commendable. Stimulated by Shilling's (2008, 2019) writings on pragmatism and the body, and my specific theorisation on the martial arts, this chronological representation show how the habits enabled people to become creative

during specific moments of crisis. Populated with the characters of students, teachers and their partners, this analysis uses Billig's (2016) emphasis on writing people and action (rather than abstract concepts and excessive noun formations) into the centre of social scientific inquiry. This is done in order to show what people can do when their bodies cannot entwine in combat through the medium of technology.

### Discussion: One pandemic, multiple responses

In this analysis, I take a chronological view to chart how the two groups struggled, adapted and thrived under the conditions of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. Overall, I adopt the perspective of pragmatism to demonstrate how martial arts instructors, their students and firm supporters have been creative in the moment of a truly international crisis, which has enabled to dissemination of knowledge, the continuation of sociability and the striving for humour and wellness. I examine the case studies while applying specific ideas on martial creation and shared cultivation outlined earlier in this article.

#### *Live and recorded Taijiquan classes through Zoom*

The School of Internal Arts is a school that brings together Taijiquan (commonly known as Tai Chi Chuan) along with other "internal" arts for the cultivation of health, spirituality and energies, such as Qigong, Dao Yin and Neigong – the overarching process of transformation. As part of an international organisation run by a renowned British teacher and author now based in Portugal, my two regular Taijiquan and Neigong classes are held in a local primary school and refugee community centre, which are obviously places for families to converge. These vulnerable venues were closed early on during the scares of the pandemic in the UK, which led our amiable and gentle instructor, David, to plan online classes. He wrote us all a message on our Facebook membership page to advertise the upcoming online classes hosted through the conference platform Zoom, explaining that "I know plenty of yoga teachers who use Zoom for their classes." As the pandemic could be devastating for his newly founded "Daoist Arts" enterprise (now his sole source of income), which included more accessible, clinically-focussed classes in the hard-hit local hospitals, David asked we students to consider leaving a kind donation of around his suggested sum of only £5 per 90-minute Taijiquan class. This particular financial aspect of the study has been possible thanks to funding

from the Hebei Social Sciences grant, from the Hebei Province, China.

As usual, students entered the class earlier than the official starting time. The Zoom platform offered views of some impressive recently installed bookshelves from the well-read, softly-spoken senior student Lloyd, while David used his conservatory for the basis of his class, opening the door for some air and even wearing sunglasses on a bright morning. Peering at the screen from a close position, David offers each student a warm greeting, calling them by their name. During the class, he stands back to offer a whole-body view, although he has been requested to adjust the camera in order for us students to view the angles of his feet. He also avoids giving critical feedback on individuals – instead opting to comment on general principles and to remind students to uphold them. The warm-up and ‘letting go’ / ‘loosening’ exercises normally precede a standing posture, which is followed by a sequence (normally four to five movements) of the short form. We could not do the pushing hands and sensitivity training of the normal class, nor the Neigong spiritual training, as David wished to supervise this for safety. In sum, the online classes are all about “putting your mind into your movement,” as David stated as we moved our scapula in slow circles during the preparatory exercises. However, being at home had some benefits of making the most of furniture to gently hold onto for footwork control exercises (slow stepping), and David sometimes even using some props to assist his teaching. For a few weeks, he used a small bottle of tea tree oil on his crown point to stress the straight alignment of the head and spine. In turn, I found a plastic clothes peg that kept on falling off when I started to forget about it!

David started to record specific segments of the classes through the function available on Zoom. He labelled these according to the exercises in question, such as “Yin-yang hands,” “Cloud hands’ or “Eight gates”, sometimes mixing Chinese with English terms and Daoist cosmological thought as is common in the parlance of contemporary British Taijiquan pedagogy (Jennings, Dodd and Brown 2020). On Sunday night, David would share the Zoom links for the new week’s classes – one on the typical Tuesday evening (6-7:30 p.m.) and the other on the Saturday morning when some workshops operated (10-11:30 a.m.). After careful editing over the weekend, David would send us the four recorded videos from two sections from the classes from Tuesday evening and Saturday morning. He asked us to kindly keep these videos to ourselves, as the material is only for our personal use due to our contribution to his class. His senior and mentor in the organisation, Matthew, was also creating his

own set of videos for those devoted students who had travelled to his specialist courses in remote areas of Britain. The members of the international organisation also made use of the founder Malcolm’s detailed podcast and newly vamped website, which for them, was a source of great knowledge and insight. David sometimes referred to these recordings in his classes, and he often made reference to classical sayings in the Taijiquan literature and Classics of Chinese medicine such as the *Yi Jin Jing* (the “Muscle-Tendon Changing Classic”). Although he uses the latest technology for streaming classes and conversations, David is adamant that the original Chinese sources (“the classics”) are the highest authority on bodily knowledge, wellbeing and human development.

On one occasion, David had pre-prepared his whiteboard with the eight main principles of Taijiquan. In sequence, we worked on the first four of those in our class for that day: Raising the crown point, sinking the shoulders (scapula), spreading the back (the *ming men* point) and relaxing the chest (the *tian tui* point). After that, we worked on the sequence of the form with no specific focus. “It’s sharpened everything up.” David noted. His students are mainly men and women in their thirties to sixties, and the classes focus on self-cultivation and wellbeing through exhaustive, strict training. David offered a reflection on his approach: “When you’re young, you’re supple and open-minded. And as you get older, people of the same age tend to be inflexible and close-minded. The phrase ‘ageing gracefully’ is a wonderful one.”

This open mindedness to new ideas is seen in the typical ‘hanging about’ after class. Beyond the classes, the majority of students stay online for a friendly discussion – first about their direct experiences, and then around deeper themes connecting to the body, health and human development. Senior students even share some of their own forms of wisdom, as Polish devotee Piotr reflected on the dangers of an inactive lifestyle for quality of life older age: “If you don’t work hard in training, life will become hard work for you.” The students, like me as the more official ethnographer, started to take direct quotes in their own personal notebooks. Senior student Lloyd added another phrase the following week: “You can’t build a skyscraper without good foundations.” Other, more junior, students had praising feedback for David’s online classes. The normally quiet and reserved Rhodri, who had been struck by COVID-19 at the beginning of the lockdown, exclaimed: “David, I think I have learned more in the last three months with you than I had in the last year...It’s just you and the videos, because you can look back at things. Normally, you are without a reference point. It’s brilliant! Thanks.” Another

student, Huw, quipped: “When are you going to do a podcast?”, hinting at the growth in martial arts podcasts, including that of David’s own renowned teacher, Malcolm, whose insightful videos enabled people like Lloyd to “know not only *what* you are doing, but *why* you are doing it.” Sandra, the dedicated Qigong veteran, then added: “You don’t know that you’ve got a good teacher until you’ve got a bad one.”

The calm presence, flexibility and bodily control of our teacher in his 50s is certainly very inspiring for me as a relatively younger man in his 30s, and seeing the benefits of regular practise, I continued to train some element of the class nearly every day. David rarely tells us how to live our lives, but he did once ask us to complete a ‘homework’ task: “Listen to your body. Where’s the tension? When I’m making a cup of tea... is my shoulder rising? I’m aware of my body. I’m listening. Try it for an hour – it’s hard.” Instead of pushing us to an extreme lifestyle, David advocated a good balance: “You’ve got to look after yourself; you’ve got to keep well... good food, good rest, good practice. Don’t overdo it.”

Pleased with the feedback and the progress with the regular attendees of his class, David pledged to continue the online Saturday classes after the “new normal” returns in Wales. We would still have our two face-to-face sessions in the usual venues, but we would also have a third, online class with the helpful video recordings. The school was growing in our town, with new students indicating interest in joining the online sessions, and one lady from the United States joining us on Zoom despite a five-hour time difference. She even attended several Saturday morning session at 10 a.m. GTM (her 5 a.m.)! Beaming Sandra gave her an “A+ for dedication!” David now had between 25 and 30 students “on the books”, but was concerned about large numbers in an online class: “I wouldn’t want something like 30 people.” He said in hesitation – as concerned with the quality of tuition as always. He closed the class with a personal reflection on our lineage: “It feels like I’m stepping back in time...it’s so deep. It’s not changed for a Western appetite. It’s like stepping back in time. I feel as if I am practising something that the Yang family practised 200 years ago.” This focus on reviving historical knowledge and imagining oneself in bygone years is also seen in historical European martial arts (HEMA).

#### *Films, fun and fitness in HEMA*

From 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, all gyms and leisure centres had to close, and this included martial arts schools that often use these facilities. Social distancing from

people outside one’s household also prevented the common informal training between sparring partners and classmates that habitually meet up between their formal classes. As such, the only people who could officially work together in a physical manner were the ‘martial arts couples’ who lived together, such as my HEMA instructor Billy and his wife, Issie. Their beloved Blade Academy was quite possibly one of the last schools to close its doors in the UK – saluting goodbye in a photographed line up some two hours before the midnight lockdown regulations were enforced. Our Marshal, Billy Marshall, is named after his affectionate rendering of his medieval hero, the Norman-English knight William Marshal, who is often claimed to be “the power behind five kings.” Issie’s pseudonym is the modern form of Marshal’s astute and noble wife, Isabella (for an excellent biography of the man, his marriage and their accomplishments, see Ashbridge, 2015). Like the historical figures, Billy and Issie make a powerhouse couple, with Billy having the size, strength and skill of a formidable warrior and Issie the business knowhow and vision to drive the Academy to success. The Blade Academy teaches medieval longsword by following the teachings of the Italian fencing master Fiore di Liberi (c.1409) among some medieval German influences, which are deciphered from Billy’s readings of their surviving manuscripts. As Jaquet and Deluz (2018) have revealed in their experimental work, HEMA is essentially the reconstruction of lost embodied knowledge, unlike Asian martial arts like Taijiquan, which often claim an uninterrupted, although continually modified, lineage of such bodily knowhow. It operates as its own subculture where its typically childless adult practitioners in their 30s can form alternative lifestyles and subcultures (Jaquet, Tuillon and Eleftherios 2020) – which, from my ethnography to date, appear to be around historical knowledge, fun, fantasy and action, and spending an immense amount of disposable income on specialist equipment. One student and the group’s webmaster, Len, has ten swords hanging in his home office (the command centre from which he initiated our Zoom meetings), which increased from six blades at the start of the lockdown.

The Blade Academy was founded in September 2018 in a cosmopolitan city in Wales. Located in a busy, multicultural urban area, it attracts many students from different backgrounds, although the majority come from white working-class Welsh families and tend to be men in their 20s and 30s. With our style being an “Italian” one (from Italy at the time of the Holy Roman Empire), we have had three regular Italian students, two Polish men as well as some English people such as me. In early 2020, Billy and Issie

opened their second Chapter (the name for a branch school) in another historic town, which enabled them to reach new students and reinforce the learning of the more experienced members. Alongside the conventional classes, the Academy runs sparring days every month or so, seasonal gradings as well as outdoor skirmishes near historic sites. There are also more theoretical classes and social events, including boardgame sessions. One of the first events developed online was a Dune and Dragons night on Sunday evenings, which was hosted by our aforementioned website manager and classmate, the tech specialist, Len.

Initially, after sharing the image of the devoted students saluting to their left breast just before the lockdown, Billy sent an understandably melancholy message through the Academy's Facebook group to explain how the Blade Academy and their friends in the School of Medieval Fencing had formed "the COVID-19 alliance" over the last week weeks, which had enabled students from both institutions to train in one other's school. He had also posted an image of the dozen students who had attended the final session in the local leisure centre – all lined up in their black uniforms. However, they could no longer meet up to cross swords. Some days later, students set up a Messenger chat forum called "Posta di Corona", jokingly named after one of the key defensive postures taken in Fiore's manuscript and fencing style, which means "the Crown Guard." This was not a forum about the actual technique (which is a relatively simple block to cover one's centre), but an open, virtual space for students to come up with ideas, raise questions and suggest specialist equipment that other students and newcomers could order during the lockdown. A week later, students suggested the idea of a movie night in which we could all watch a film together on Netflix (to stream the film) and Zoom (for a live discussion). "Bad films" were deliberately selected, as Billy explained in relation to one of his favourite actors, Liam Neeson: "We're not going to watch Oscar Schindler [of *Schindler's List* fame] – otherwise we wouldn't be able to laugh about it." For that reason, poor action films were selected for us to unmute our respective microphones to joke about the plot, the poor choreography and logic of the movie. However, Billy was always keen to discuss the virile masculinity of tall and muscular actors that often featured in the films. The films selected were normally American, with some having swords in them, to the delight, disgust (and sometimes amusement) of many of the students expressing comments over Zoom such as: "Now that's what I call a sword!" "There's swords in this film, Templar John [a Knights Templar re-enactor and HEMA

practitioner]!" and "That's the fifth sword he's [the actor] lost in this film!"

Some weeks later, Billy felt comfortable to teach a HEMA class through Zoom. Friday nights were the best for all of us, so we agreed on a time to facilitate new students who were working shifts as key workers. With the summer weather improving, we were able to train in our gardens, patios and even car parks in the case of Billy and Issie, who had the open space to experiment with different camera angles. We muted the microphone after the ten-minute welcoming chat while other members joined the Zoom chatroom. My neighbours seemed fascinated by my sword fighting techniques, with two youngsters spying on my training session from their trampoline. It must have changed their minds about the seemingly reserved resident of this quiet, suburban zone of the city!

One of the Academy's core members is Adam, a budding stuntman in his 20s with experience in gymnastics, parkour and Ninjutsu. Following the lockdown, he wished to accompany his fellow fitness enthusiast Angelo to horse riding classes, which are advocated for stunt workers in the film industry. Billy invited Adam to lead specialist fitness classes for the Academy. The fittest of us all by far, Adam wrote to the Facebook group to offer us a fitness training session directly after the regular HEMA class on Fridays. He admitted to feeling a drop in his personal fitness levels, so he offered to coordinate a high intensity interval training (HIIT) workout for us. This form of training is increasingly popular in the fitness industry and among YouTube viewers, and has even been used by the British celebrity trainer and lifestyle guru, Joe Wicks, in place of traditional physical education lessons in the United Kingdom (Malcolm and Veijia, 2020). From his "Body Coach" YouTube platform, Wicks has developed a series of specialist sessions tailored for children. In our case in the Blade Academy, our inspirational instructor and body coach was the athletic Adam. Using his phone and iPad in the patio of his partner's house in a sleepy commuter town, Adam led us through a series of whole-body physical exercises, including variations of the classic press-up and sit-up. He had an exercise mat to work from, as well as a slight wall for decline push-ups and core exercises. In his lounge, 40-something Tom Edwards of the new Chapter of the Academy, worked out with his wife, who had started to train with us online, and even their children joined in at one point. "It's a whole family workout in the Edwards household!" Joked Adam.

Students did pick up injuries, not from the actual training with the Academy, but from a variety of external sources, such as Adam moving a heavy flow-

erpot with poor technique, and our webmaster Len stubbing his toe. Some weeks into the HIIT workouts, we had moved to specialist training sessions for the abdomen. When Adam was busy with family matters, Billy took us through a gruelling session that formed part of his own gruelling abs workout. He had even gone through it that very morning, and was keen to do more for his washboard stomach. Once Adam returned, we had a workout for the legs only, which required the use of home apparatus such as stairs or books (for the calf raises) and a seat or sofa (for the hip raises). We went for three rounds, but with only four students being able to train that evening due to injuries, we were paired up in a virtual manner. When Angelo had finished his set, he called me to stop my alternative exercise of sit ups. My left thigh had started to cramp up, but I still managed to complete some of the core exercises. Adam had to leave us to ring a friend who was in hospital, so Billy took over the cool down with our familiar stretches from our normal classes. This was our “new normal” – virtual training, partner interactions and humour coupled with the customary movements and opening and closing rituals of a typical class in the Academy. With the four students training, Billy quipped: “Eventually, all of us will feign injuries until it’s only George training on his own. We will get to watch him suffer.” I returned the joke, saying that it would be sweet revenge for my misbehaviour during our beloved unit combat. “That’ll learn him!” Shaun called, finishing off the shared joke. In fact, several weeks after this joke, it was only me, Billy and Issie who were fit enough to do the workout. Billy cancelled the class!

During the months of June, Billy had asked my partner, Barbara, if she would be willing to lead the group through some meditation exercises as she had done in a conference on Martial Arts and Healthy Communities that I had organised at my university. Barbara is a qualified mindfulness facilitator and is currently researching meditative practices in her native Mexico. After practising the basic ‘body scan’ with me as her student, she felt comfortable to direct some exercises for the group on a Tuesday night – a time that was agreed upon through the private Facebook group. We had a direct Messenger video call with Billy to learn more about his motivations for initiating this new training session, and there we learned that there were two rationales for meditating: 1) To enhance the students’ overall mental wellbeing during the workout and 2) to cultivate a sense of calm for martial arts purposes, as the HEMA manuscripts such as those of Fiore had nothing to say on mental preparation. Barbara felt more comfortable to begin with the former objective, as she does not have a martial arts back-

ground. Billy was therefore working around some of the limitations of the existing literature on HEMA, which tended to be almost entirely technical. Instead, Billy cited martial arts icon Miyamoto Musashi, who had written a treatise on the technical, tactical and mental aspects of warfare and duelling in *The Book of Five Rings* (Musashi 2002). He proudly explained that he had such texts for almost half of his 32 years of life. So despite our being a HEMA group, there was still a reverence for some aspects of Eastern martial arts and Asian meditative traditions. Billy summarised the potential transformative benefits of these practices for the group: “Thanks to Adam, we’re going to come out of this fit. Hopefully with the meditation, we can come out this feeling well and happy with the world.”

Nevertheless, Billy stressed the nature of historical *European* martial arts in our second tactics night, emphasizing the work “European” as such. With an injury to his hip from running on concrete, we suggested that Billy develop a theoretical class while he recovered. Before COVID-19 was part of public discourse, we had already experienced an excellent tactics night to discuss field battles. Now it was our turn to learn about siege warfare. Billy had prepared an impressive PowerPoint presentation that drew entirely on photographs and their own images and diagrams to take us through the fundamentals of fortifications and how to defend and overcome them. It started with a stunning image of a medieval Italian town with many towers. As Billy and Issie had lived in Italy for four years, Billy could draw on their extensive knowledge of the Romans and other groups; they could link this to Britain and in particular, their native Wales, including sites such as Caerleon – an old Roman fort, and Edwards I’s ring of castles in North Wales – something Alfie once labelled “palaces of repression.” One of our Italian students, Angelo, often entered the discussion with some support for their historical points and Latin etymology. Together, the teachers and students developed a highly informative, creative and sometimes funny lecture that enabled us to feel connected to European fortifications and military history. Billy even created his own 2D charts of how a barbarian hoard (symbolised by an image of Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*) could tunnel below a castle, which could be countered by an “undermine.” We even learned the military original of this verb in the English language.

As social historian Johnes (2019) has pointed out, Wales is arguably England’s first colony, and it derives its name and identity from this often uneasy relationship. In modern times, Wales has enjoyed more autonomy from its old coloniser, England, and this extends to the Welsh Government’s localised controls over the Coronavirus regulations. Indeed, the Welsh

Government, alongside its Scottish colleagues, has criticized the UK Government's decisions to open up international travel the summer. Moreover, while pubs in England are reopened, Wales still had restrictions for travel to a 5-mile radius. Billy has been understandably disappointed that he cannot reopen the two Chapters of the Academy, but this has not stopped him from planning to set up a hygienic environment that follows all expectations of a post-pandemic martial arts class. Issie announced a bulk order of black face masks bearing the Academy's logo, which came at a good price of two masks for £6. These were ready weeks in advance of the grand reopening in the two leisure centres.

### Conclusions: Coming in and out of the lockdown

This article has sought to share recent and ongoing developments in online pedagogy during the COVID-19 by using two case studies of British martial arts schools. These case studies of Taijiquan and HEMA have offered examples of the diverse responses from instructors, students and the wider community supporting the schools in order to sustain their collective cultivation of health and skill and sense of deep community and belonging. It is hoped that this article is not just timely but also practical in the sense that it can be used by other researchers, martial arts instructors and leaders of other forms of physical culture during the ongoing global crisis that we find ourselves within. Taking a pragmatic approach, I have attempted to delve into the emerging reactions to the crisis across the four months of data collection while considering themes of habit, crisis and creativity inspired by Shilling (2008, 2019) and shared cultivation (Jennings 2010). It connects with work on meaning in sport to show how meaningful martial arts are for its practitioners, who go to various creative means to continue their discussions, practice, teaching and sense of comradeship on a weekly basis.

The thematic analysis was not revealed in this particular article, as I instead opted for a storytelling approach. Numerous themes overlapped the two schools, such as the use of light humour and "banter" between the teachers and their students as well as the use of student feedback in order to plan for the future events, such as what will now be a longstanding online class on Saturdays for the Taijiquan association. The shared aspect of martial arts discourse is noteworthy, as it shows how these systems, at least in these particular British contexts, are not totally hierarchical, patriarchal or restrictive as many outsid-

ers might believe. Nor are they particularly individual or solitary endeavours as the popular imagination might suggest. Each student brings with them a specific way of looking at the world, and knowledge of important things such as information technology (IT). This can be seen in the hard work done by Len, the webmaster of the Blade Academy, who has access to the technology and possesses the IT know-how that his marshal, Billy, does not. The varied use of technology for different reasons (Netflix for film nights or Messenger for general discussions) might be useful for other practitioner-researchers in the martial arts when dealing with future outbreaks of infectious disease or forms of natural disaster impeding the direct bodily connection that martial arts rely on. They may choose to share their good practices of video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo or perhaps create a podcast about martial arts under restrictive circumstances – something that is happening in martial arts studies as an academic enterprise ([https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYwv\\_DP-EcGaB2h\\_dPop3ozM8r2Mz-jSWX](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYwv_DP-EcGaB2h_dPop3ozM8r2Mz-jSWX)) as well as physical activity research networks (<https://www.podbean.com/podcast-detail/pb-f7ugm-58cd01/Physical%20Activity%20Researcher>).

This article has contributed to knowledge on online martial arts pedagogies as well as ethnographies of the social aspects of martial arts under COVID-19. Although it directly contributes to another project in martial arts studies, its findings on creative pedagogy, communal effort and specialist contributions from within institutions could be transferred to other sporting and physical cultural contexts. Yoga classes online, football penalty kick practice and stationary bicycle training are all examples of the physical dimensions of training that might continue thanks to digital technology. Meanwhile, the sociability can continue with film and documentary nights and blended events drawing on short videos and breakout rooms, as the Blade Academy are currently planning for their strategy nights. I encourage researchers to continue to heed the words of Parnell et al. (2020) and the first issue of *Sociología del Deporte* in order to continue to come up with solutions to foster solidarity, encourage a healthy lifestyle and support one another in times of isolation and loneliness – especially as many countries around the world may enter a second lockdown with the second wave being imminent if not already upon us.

Due to the rapid data collection, analysis and write-up to delve into this pressing theme, there are inevitable limitations of this article, which is a snapshot of two cases in a specific time (only four months of what was might be the first lockdown) and place (the UK). This article also makes use of some early

publications on COVID-19, while there will be a greater depth of literature to draw upon in the coming months. Beyond the confines of the pandemic, future research might delve into the relationships between the body, text and knowledge, and ideas from classic texts (such as HEMA fight books and Chinese medical treatise) was particularly important in HEMA and Taijiquan. A noteworthy sociological theme is the use of historical role models and masculinity in the martial arts – drawing on romantic ideals of warrior archetypes for the knights and sages of the contemporary age. Moreover, as indicated in the data, a decolonial perspective on local and global martial arts would help understand how history is being reimagined through the research and practice of martial arts aficionados from a critical perspective. This would also add to the questioning of Western rationale science as the key form of knowledge in society, as in medical theory, which is increasingly being disputed by the Taijiquan group. All of these themes might enable the continued building of theory in the burgeoning academic (yet highly practical) field of martial arts studies. I hope this article has made a small contribution to help us understand the creative and pragmatic nature of martial arts pedagogy at a time where the relationships between sport, health and society are more prescient than ever.

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