

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

Digital Proximities
Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices

Now We Know What is Like to be a Teacher

Interview with
Martha Otilia Olvera Estrada
Recorded on April 06, 2020

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Digital Proximities 002 Olvera
Martha Otilia Olvera Estrada
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Translated Response from Spanish

1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:13 Gutiérrez** *My dearest friend Martha, thank you so much for joining me. The idea of*
3 *this series of short clips is to share with other folks across the planet what are the things that we*
4 *are facing as educators during the times of -not cholera- but Coronavirus. Martha, would you*
5 *mind introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about the context of your school. The role -the*
6 *roles- that you play?*

7 **0:48 Olvera** Yes off course! I am a teacher and administrator and I have worked in
8 Junior High school teaching but also at the university level as a researcher and professor of
9 Anthropology. I am now fully retired from the University but I became the director of a small
10 private school that started in 1968. The section that I work in is the elementary school with
11 children from 6 to 12 years of age. Our total student population is of 120 kids distributed in
12 classrooms from 15 to 20 students. We never wanted to have more children than that in the
13 classroom because we do not think it is possible otherwise to give them the attention that is
14 required. The High school section of our school is directed by my sister Guadalupe and we do
15 not have more than a few students in each classroom distributed in only has four groups. Our
16 total population is 40 students in High school and for a total of some 300 students.

17 **01:59** Our social context is lower middle to middle class: mostly working people and
18 professionals, doctors, teachers, businessmen, people that must work paycheck to paycheck to

19 make ends meet. Ours is not a private school serving large corporations of higher socioeconomic
20 standing. The city has a little more than 1 million inhabitants. Quite industrial, with many
21 international companies, large companies, from air industry to metal-mechanics. The industry in
22 Queretaro started back in the seventies so that we can say that it is a modern city, yet we have
23 parts of our population still living with principles and values from a century or two centuries ago.
24 So, it is interesting because you may find advanced technology and also people that values
25 history and traditions.

26 **03:50 Gutiérrez** *So, Martha, a situation like the one we are living right now... Most*
27 *schools in the US have been asked to be closed now. What is the situation in Mexico today?*

28 **04:03 Olvera** We were already aware not because of what authorities said, but from
29 other colleagues, that we would be likely to face a very difficult situation. We were in a way
30 prepared: in our school every November we always start campaigning to help families prepare
31 against the flu season combating contagion from illnesses among our student body. But we never
32 thought this was going to be so difficult.

33 **04:54** Starting in February we heard the rumors that closures were likely to happen as the last
34 resort to react to the pandemic. On March 17 we were commanded by the authorities to close
35 schools. We immediately started a project, that we had already in the pipeline so that teachers
36 could continue working with the students. The kids took materials to their homes and continued
37 to work with using the different approaches and technologies afforded and preferred by each
38 individual instructor. Some prefer Zoom, others Classroom software or even YouTube. Marco,
39 for example provide, you know Marco well, he provides instruction every day and sends prompts
40 for exercises and homework: All of his lecturing is provided through YouTube. So, kids can see
41 the lecture as many times as needed.

42 **06:13 Gutiérrez** *One of the big challenges that we are facing at any level,*
43 *elementary school, high school university, is actually twofold: on the one hand we need to make*
44 *sure that the students' experience is such that they feel the value coming in. Like they are gaining*
45 *knowledge, that they are not lagging behind. We also need to be aware of the context that the*
46 *students are living in. The parents have a double burden, students are no longer coming they do*
47 *not have jobs...right now... what is the situation there?*

48 **07:04 Olvera** We have our parents facing all kinds of problems: some do not have a
49 computer, others do or have tablets and many other elements. I saw how some of our teachers
50 like Marco have quickly adopted the technology to reach out. I can share some of the materials
51 so that you can see it. With the online lectures, teachers are also sending links to access
52 audiovisual and written materials. In Mexico all the official textbooks crafted by the Secretariat
53 of Education are readily available and for free to all students. So that a teacher can assign an
54 exercise in those materials. For example, asking a student to investigate the history of a historical
55 character like Agustin Iturbide or to find out who was the composer of the national anthem.

56 **08:29** What we prioritized at the school was the student teacher contact. We did not tell students
57 to simply write down a list of homework assignments to be then send back to the teacher when
58 they were done. Instead, we are in constant contact with children, at least twice a week. The
59 response from the parents has been incredible. I received a touching message congratulating me
60 for the work we as a school are doing with the children. We made a complete program
61 explaining students how they need to take care of themselves, disinfecting their back packs, their
62 uniforms and their materials and how to behave at home. This is something that can help them
63 keep their routines and obligations while at home.

64 **09:37** Being locked down generates quite a bit of anxiety. Parents are desperate but this has
65 enabled them to see how much teachers actually do. I am glad they are seeing it. They now send
66 us memes saying “mom and dad is time to shine” as teachers! Parents make an incredible effort
67 because some have lost their jobs, and those with businesses are also closing and losing income.
68 Many of them are seeing their job places closing and they are forced to stay put and they do not
69 know what is going to happen. The uncertainty is perhaps the worst of it. People do not know
70 what is coming: they know we are in the second phase, and that there will be a third, but no one
71 really knows what is going to happen

72 **10:49 Gutiérrez** *Exactly. Martha, the other aspect that I was curious about was*
73 *evaluation, the assessment of your students. How are you handling that?*

74 **11:01 Olvera** What I organize from the administration of the school was to use online
75 and an email communication tree, so that all the information that is flowing from teachers to
76 students I have access to it. This way, in the particular instance a teacher is unable to contact
77 some parents, I will be able to troubleshoot and make sure the communication flows well. Every
78 day I am in contact with the teachers, brief meetings, and I remain informed about every children
79 status, so that I can contact the parents when needed. This way the community remains actively
80 communicated. Every week the families receive a newsletter where we inform them of the things
81 that we are working on.

82 **12:04** For example, we have a psychologist. Every week she sends a message helping families
83 being patient and to remain calm. She helps us to know how to handle our anxiety and anguish.
84 For instance, we sent an exercise asking the family to completely disconnect any and all
85 electronic devices and to meditate together for five minutes, all the family, with breathing
86 exercises. Some parents reported being able to finally talk to their children without distraction,

87 feeling stronger together as a family. This was an excellent exercise. It really helps children
88 expressing what they feel: I miss the classroom, I miss my friends, I miss my teachers.

89 **13:46 Gutiérrez** *Absolutely. The whole issue of the human interaction, how can you*
90 *introduce that is so difficult. And most of the learning is interactive, right?*

91 **13:57 Olvera** Each teacher made a proposal. For example, Pablo teaches English. He
92 made a video taking them to Greece. Students see images but then the teacher appears in the
93 video and he engages with the kids. They see the images and their teacher. Our teachers are quite
94 top notch in the use of technologies!

95 **15:01 Gutiérrez** *Incredible. As a pedagogist, as an educator. What are the things that this*
96 *change of modality that has been forced upon you and the school... what are the things that you*
97 *would change permanently? Is there anything that this new way of doing things is taking you to*
98 *think: "OK, this was an opportunity to rethink what we do and this is what we can adopt in the*
99 *future"?*

100 **15:34 Olvera** Yes. Look, at the school we have a project: We are Protagonists and we
101 are Part of our History. I created this project basically because of my training as an
102 Anthropologist. We consolidate traditions and memories that are part of the families of the
103 students. The families of the students often keep clothing or artifacts from other times: the scarf
104 from grandma, or a stone grinder that actually are related to the history of Mexico they learn at
105 school. One day of the year we ask students to bring those artifacts and share and also to bring
106 their domestic animals and this is something that we shall recover when we come back to the
107 school, because there is no way we will be able to completely replace the full experience of the
108 classroom. We had planned a monthly project for sciences this time. We were working on
109 healthy technologies or environmentally sound technologies, but this is something that kids have

110 to develop interactively, not in isolation. Yet we still assign something to do at home indeed, but
111 we shall miss the moments of sharing. We will continue sending-out activities and trying not to
112 lose the ability to connect when kids while they are out. Our plan of emergency contemplates
113 this eventuality. For older students I even communicate directly and personally (Well done
114 Regina....) this enable us to maintain an environment of schooling.

115 **18:43 Gutiérrez** *Martha, we are going to be running out of time in a few minutes. Before*
116 *we closed I wanted to ask: What are the main challenges and your main hopes in the next few*
117 *weeks as we ride this horrible pandemic all over the planet?*

118 **19:00 Olvera** Yes. Well first and foremost to see our students recovering this attitude of
119 tranquility. We aspire to provide peace of mind and an opportunity to learn without anxiety.
120 Academically, this crisis has forced us to use a better hierarchical arrangement of what is
121 essential to learn and what can be postponed, in all disciplines. In this context my pedagogical
122 pillar is Reading, My project We Are Good Readers we had been sharing this all year round, and
123 now part of this is shared remotely. Some teachers will remind students of some of the readings
124 for example Matilda, and now they can correlate the reading with movies or cable shows, but the
125 big challenge is to create solid readers so that reading will provide an opportunity to catch up and
126 stay on target. Pedagogically some of our teachers have developed new and amazing strategies. I
127 do believe we shall be able to share this.

128 **20:53** Some schools actually closed completely on March 18 mostly public. But since we are a
129 small private school we were able to remain operational. Most public schools just closed, but
130 since the population is large and dispersed it is difficult to handle education in these
131 circumstances. It is so difficult for larger schools, but we can do this because we have the right
132 scale.

133 **22:03 Gutiérrez** *So you were in a better position. Martha we are running out of time. I*
134 *want to thank you so much first of all for taking my questions in English, but this is going to help*
135 *us bringing this out. It feels a little weird, but I thank you for that. Thank you for the incredible*
136 *effort of innovation and the maintenance of education for so many kids. You may think it is a*
137 *small thing that you are doing, but it is huge, because you are setting up a model of how to*
138 *confront a situation that who would have thought, just a few weeks ago, we would be facing!*

139 **22:43 Olvera** Off course. I will be so glad to share some of our projects, like Tell Me
140 Something Scary or There comes the Revolutionaries. All of these come from the We Are Good
141 Readers Program.

142 **23: 05 Gutierrez** *I am going to place the links to those materials.*

143 **23:19 Olvera** Many, many thanks. It is a challenge for teachers from all over the world!