

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

Digital Proximities
Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices

Interview with
Andrew Knox Cass
Recorded on May 6, 2020

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Digital Proximities 014 KnoxCass

Andrew Knox Cass

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:13 Gutiérrez** *Andrew Knox Cass, thank you so much for taking the time. I have*
3 *California Envy for the sky that is right behind you, which is gorgeous and amazing. It's like you*
4 *have a nice weather. It is getting better these days I guess.*

5 **00:28 Knox Cass** Yeah, very nice Spring, even though we are not allowed to go outside to
6 enjoy.

7 **00:32 Gutiérrez** *Why don't we get started by you sharing with us a little bit of your*
8 *trajectory and institutional context? Where are you? What type of students are you working*
9 *with? What work do you do?*

10 **00:52 Knox Cass** I teach courses at a professional high school which is what we would call a
11 Polytechnic. We offer up to a bachelor level in a variety of courses. You'll have heard from some
12 of the others you've interviewed, there's a very large nursing school, a very large educational
13 school, and our school is technology and business. In the technology department I am in the
14 Energy and Environment Department of that. We have about 25 teachers and we're running
15 courses between energy technology energy management automation engineering robotics all
16 those sorts of topics and

17 **01:39 Gutiérrez** *Mostly STEM, science, technology. Where are you located?*

18 **01:48 Knox Cass** In Aalborg, which is in the northern part of Denmark, in North Jutland. It's
19 a very remote capital. So, we are a rich and old capital, I suppose, a state capital and the state is a

20 very poor one compared to the others at around. So, you can imagine our situation we don't get
21 infrastructure spending that other states do uh-huh a little bit peps more industrial in its but then
22 then Copenhagen or some of the other big European cities

23 **02:21 Gutiérrez** *I see so I'm listening to some chimes and bells behind you...*

24 **02:27 Knox Cass** I can't, I am not sure if you can see that's the Budolfi cathedral there that's
25 the center of town we live just on the same block as the main Cathedral. Yeah that's the
26 glockenspiel which runs every hour

27 **02:41 Gutiérrez** *That is that is wonderful. For what I'm hearing, Andrew, your student
28 base will be a working-class and professional, sort of families.*

29 **02:56 Knox Cass** Yeah. We have a predominance of plumbers electricians coming through a
30 department to learn various niche aspects of that industry, whether it be to do with an elective
31 we're running at the moment is sort of renewable energy installer, and it gives you a certificate
32 that you can put solar panels up or or you know and calculate out how to install and what's the
33 best way to put a solar installation or a small wind or something like that on somebody's house.
34 We're really up there at the cold face. A lot of heat pump conversions and a lot of activities such
35 as ventilation, insulation, so the redoing the windows, double glazing all that sort of stuff is right
36 in our wheelhouse for energy savings sustainability

37 **03:53 Gutiérrez** *That's wonderful, that's what we all should be looking at. I'm not familiar
38 with Aalborg, I never been there. I have to tell you that it was on my list of places to visit this
39 summer and it's not going to , unfortunately. I was going to go visit your area. I don't see any
40 planes on your sky behind you, so I don't think my plane is going to be landing there any time
41 soon. So, if I ever go, I will make sure that we have a beer or something. I'm very hopeful it will
42 come to pass all these How large is the city Andrew?*

43 **04:38 Knox Cass** About a hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants thereabouts it's growing
44 quite rapidly as these regional capitals tend to do and is undergoing quite rapid change so there's
45 a lot going on.

46 **04:50 Gutiérrez** *How many students do you have in your institution?*

47 **04:54 Knox Cass** About 20,000 or so, and probably another four or five thousand online,
48 full-time.

49 **05:04 Gutiérrez** *Okay. So, it might sound like your institution was ready to cope with a*
50 *rapid change. Why don't we talk a little bit about how the pandemic hits your area when did you*
51 *learn and what were the issues you had to face?*

52 **05:21 Knox Cass** It's very funny but honestly, we're all following it on the news in the early
53 days, and it became quite clear what the science was saying about this disease but there was a lot
54 of confusion and a lot of I would say amongst people bewildered. A bewildered expectation that
55 things will be just carrying on; and we had a staff meeting a regular Friday staff meeting, or I
56 can't remember exactly when it started, but it was the week before we got locked down on a
57 Wednesday. And about staff meeting I raised it as a point on the agenda and said I think we
58 should prepare to move all of our classes online, and we should start thinking about what to do
59 because at the rate it's going next week or the week after they're going to shut them back down.
60 And I was making a case that we should actually start planning what the students should do, we
61 should start to make some projects that students can work on at home and get a little bit
62 prepared. And that was met with agreement and some discussion around the table and nods of
63 yes if that's what we should do but they should nothing came in them nothing we didn't he should
64 get a chance to do anything because by Wednesday everything was shut down. So, it was quite
65 fast here the government responded quite early, and gave us a half shutdown so the small shops

66 are open the large department stores and large format shops were all closed, but the small
67 boutique shops and fast food outlets and everything that was small-scale under I think about a
68 thousand square feet or something like that was fine to stay open. And everybody just went home
69 and that was it.

70 **07:32 Gutiérrez** *So what happens to your instruction then? There was little tent to prepare*
71 *although for what I gather some of you already teaching online in maybe even you have a robust*
72 *system in place.*

73 **07:43 Knox Cass** Well we do. It's actually blended learning, but the students only get a few
74 days at the institution per semester so by and large it's sort of 95 percent online and 5 percent in
75 the class. And of course, all of my teaching is both in that online and in class, in so I was
76 eminently prepared to show courts that said I was doing both online and in class yeah into the
77 online mode. So for me it was a very simple preparation in fact it's been very, very comfortable
78 because I have had the courses all prepared for me it was a simple cut and paste operation and I
79 was ready to go. I've just started teaching an elective today and it was less than an hour to go
80 from zero to have the whole course up and running open this morning no problem.

81 **08:42 Gutiérrez** *I promise I won't tell my colleagues.*

82 **08:44 Knox Cass** Yeah, I don't know well actually, you should, because I think it's almost a
83 high crime that teachers are not taught how to teach using the full affordances of all of the ICT
84 that it's available to us. I think it's absolutely crazy, and it's a lot of really old nonsense. I've
85 published a book on how teachers can move from teaching class to teaching online it was
86 published by Aalborg University Press last year. It has a step-by-step sort of an indication, I'll
87 send you the link-

88 **09:24 Gutiérrez** *Yes, yes.*

89 **09:25 Knox Cass** - as to how to plan the courses, and exactly, all the research behind it. And
90 so, for me, it was a really, it's been a holiday, really, because all that's been deleted is my
91 requirement to actually go to work and be there for many hours. And I just put everything online.
92 Now, when I say I put everything online, I don't mean I've got videos of me teaching. That's just
93 nonsense that's not what teaching online is all about. I mean well, look, all of the research
94 generally points to one: that the tools that you use in any lesson don't have much bearing on the
95 learning outcomes. Rather, it's got to do with an overall lesson plan, and an arch of trying to
96 establish learning goals at getting to those learning goals and how you do that, can be successful
97 so field trips are a successful way to do that classroom lectures a successful way to do that but so
98 is setting assignments online in quizzes and giving the people giving your students to do active
99 work in our online space and I create discussion forums and things like that and places for them
100 to share group activities the whole nine yards I do it all in a virtual space and it's all
101 asynchronous, so I don't have to bother trying to get the kids together in one place and try and
102 speak to them all it's just such a hassle to get these messaging systems. And I speak to a lot of
103 my colleagues, like Lorna, and they're trying to put, trying to piece together “how do I get this
104 lecture and into this online space” and they take a lot of response on what they'll feel, a lot of
105 fear about having to record themselves put themselves out there make a video and never sounds
106 as good as you want never looks as good as you want it's not edited very nicely and so the whole
107 thing becomes very daunting and there's a there's a huge resistance to go their path and therefore
108 you shouldn't. If you're intimidated by recording something alone, you don't. You don't need it.
109 for it doesn't enhance you teaching at all, you know it's a really crazy thing.

110 **11:47 Gutiérrez** *There hasn't been enough, I don't think we haven't used it. I live in*
111 *California, the cradle of many of the technologies that we use across the world, and we are not,*

112 *by far, we are not embedded in a pedagogical approach to the use of these tools. It's actually*
113 *quite casually enforced at times, at least it feels like that. Isn't that interesting?*

114 **12:12 Knox Cass** Well yeah and I think... you know my wife is involved in the educational
115 research. She is a professor of Techno-Anthropology and teaching online, teaching technology.
116 And so, you know we were a perhaps absolutely closer to this topic than other families and
117 other households. But it seems to me as if a lot of the actual research that's being done by her and
118 her colleagues and in teams all throughout the world on teaching in the digital space, there's
119 excellent resources out there it's well understood what needs to be done. There are some
120 excellent resources to get together, but there's almost no teacher training in it. Whether at tertiary
121 or at the I mean I can only speak for tertiary level, I don't know what's going on in other schools.
122 But you know, it's just a travesty, that there's so much work going on, and teachers just don't
123 professionally keep up with their profession. Once the teacher comes out of teaching college it's
124 just about all done and, you know, doctors are forced to go to conferences and forced to redo and
125 keep up-to-date with bulletins. And that is sadly lacking in the education, because it's not seen as
126 a proficient, like medical diagnosis. It's not held in that high regard. People don't care to rise to
127 the top of their field. There aren't the same incentives in place, I mean, it's really a strange it's
128 really a strange situation, and as a consequence we all suffer so there's a works been done.

129 **13:56 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, absolutely this assuming that our colleagues, the ones that are a*
130 *little bit more reticent about embracing technology...*

131 **14:08 Knox Cass** ...which is an 85% of them according to Russell - yeah that's really all...

132 **14:11 Gutiérrez** *I want to think that not all of them are resisting yours because they don't*
133 *want to do the work. Some of them would... we'll talk about how important it is to have the*
134 *presence of the classroom the interaction of the classroom. Students will consistently report*

135 *these days -because we're also conducting interviews with students- but the one thing that they*
136 *miss the most is that interaction. Because it's like we are, we have evolved, as a species, to have*
137 *a level of interaction so, how do you feel about the way the digital tools that we use, the way they*
138 *help us or stop us from having that level of interaction?*

139 **14:52 Knox Cass** I think, to be honest with you, the this this is a tired old argument, about
140 classroom interactions. But, you know, much of pedagogy is trying to create enough atmosphere
141 in the classic students can actually do work. You know, a large part of a teacher's day is trying to
142 reduce the number of interactions going on in the class, and it causes stress. The strict rules and
143 regulations... it's a very hierarchical environment that teaches a lot of power over the students. I
144 mean, and so this is it's a nonsense: to think that this interaction has such an important role to
145 play in actually being at school. If that was the case, then schools would look very different now.
146 Our school, for example, is a big building full of white boxes, with whiteboards at the front in
147 plain office style seating with no posters on the wall, nothing, I mean, it's the coldest, most
148 uninspiring environment you can ever think of, and we think that putting students in there's a
149 stimulating environment, they are going to learn stuff. it's just it just goes our kids every piece of
150 research on education that I've ever heard of it's just not stimulating it's not a very good
151 environment and the environment it serves does not lend itself to this interaction and I think you
152 if you've looked in a modern workspaces like the you know, the Googleplex, and you see
153 multifunctional rooms and areas where people could break off and do work and quiet zones and
154 active zones and that's how schools and if you want interaction that's how it should be arranged
155 but you know and this is this is 20, 30 years old stuff, you know, you don't need to go far on the
156 internet to find out that that's all being done not built on this place is very often, I mean, you do
157 get some you know, some schools are, but most of them are built on an economic thing you

158 could as many rooms as possible stuff them full as many bums as possible as short as possible
159 and get them out the door

160 **16:57 Gutiérrez** *Institutions are slow to learn and, you know, and the survival of the*
161 *institution sometimes is what drives the decisions. And that's not always the most rational of*
162 *ways of making decisions. So you know this really leads nicely into an aspect that I'm really*
163 *interested in getting perspectives and I might want to hear what you have to say about. Most*
164 *folks that I've talked to, see opportunity in this crisis, in this situation, in that we've been asked to*
165 *do what we probably should have been asked to do long time ago. And it's an opportunity to*
166 *rethink and retool what we're doing. So, if it was suddenly in your power, Andrew, what kind of a*
167 *scenario you would go back to gladly. In terms institution. How do you see the future?*

168 **17:55 Knox Cass** Well, if I had the power to change the way the institution operates, I would
169 stop... at the moment our institution is suffering with constrained budget and has recently gone
170 around you making redundancies and things like that in cutting staff. And I think this is a
171 stupidity because, of course, the teaching load doesn't decrease unless you get rid of students,
172 and of course with tighter staff, the administrative load becomes higher. I mean, everything just
173 starts to wear you down, and the attitude at work has changed. Everybody's feeling stressed. We
174 have people off, on sick leave, because they are stressed and then you add covert on top. There
175 are two things: one... I don't make predictions about the future, based on what's seen in the past,
176 but a couple of things give me some really optimism. One is I like the sound of the discussions
177 that are being had now, then this old tired old excuse "oh if we have to have the students in class
178 to make things happen" is now blown out of the water. Students can't be in class and things are
179 still happening. The exams will still get passed. Their old hobby horse is dead, and it's been
180 proven then it can be done, and maybe we don't go for a hundred percent of the students in a

181 school but maybe we can go for a mix of 50/50, a mix of half of the students' time is spent at
182 school and the other half of the time has been away from school or in a less structured
183 environment, where they can do work online. And then your requirement for buildings and all
184 that, is severely cut. Now our institution wouldn't have to get rid of staff if it could get rid of a
185 campus, and keep the same number of students. And I think this is a discussion now that I've
186 been saying this in our institution, for the whole time of work there for the last four years --and
187 now it looks fairly prophetic-- that we could take this online stuff and blend it and a 50/50, 60/40
188 kind of blend and have a really top-quality result. Our school follows this sort of project-based
189 learning, so the students are asked to do a rather large project each semester, anyway, so that's
190 really good. They work on their own, and they can, you know, they're autonomous in that regard,
191 for a large part. And we can really enhance that, and lift it to the next level. I think without too
192 much suffering and we could save a lot on buildings. But it seems to me as if much management
193 is concerned about how grandiose things look, as to how they actually function. So that's going
194 to be a problem. But I mean encouraged by the conversations are a big hit the conversations are
195 improving like the one we're having.

196 **21:05 Gutiérrez** *Yes, absolutely I think that's a great opportunity that emerges from a*
197 *crisis. That we're forced to sit down and rethink what we have to do, and also there to apply*
198 *some of the ideas that we've been having for a long time, this is not new, as you were well*
199 *saying, so I'm really intrigued about your writing and I would love to get a hold on it. Is your*
200 *book also in English?*

201 **21:40 Knox Cass** Yeah, it is it's written in English and it's a free download it's for the
202 published weeks paid for by the university so it's a teacher is also any teach you can get it for
203 free.

204 **24:55 Gutiérrez** *I will make sure to as you know I have this series of clips posted on our*
205 *YouTube channel as well so I will make sure the set up a link underneath so that people that are*
206 *interested can access that and I for one will be very interested. So you know I hope you are*
207 *prophetic in that all over the world we move into a different kind of application of pedagogies.*
208 *It's long overdue and that's the one thing that I'm liking about this situation, that is forcing us to*
209 *sit down and rethink. All right. Thank you so much for your time. I don't see any white lines on*
210 *your sky, again. I wish there were a little more so that my plane would be flying there. I'd love to*
211 *have the opportunity one day stop-by, and say hello in person. Andrew, thank you for your time.*

212 **23:11 Knox Cass** *It's not a problem. I'll send you a link by email today. have a great day at*
213 *work. I will send you a link today.*

214 **23:25** [Music]