

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

*Digital Proximities*  
*Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices*

A Kodak Moment: Thousands of Courses and Twelve Days

Interview with  
Helen Klæbe  
Recorded on May 8, 2020

Juan José Gutiérrez  
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Digital Proximities 017 Klæbe

Helen Klæbe

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:12 Gutiérrez** *Helen, thank you so much for taking the time. I have to express that the*  
3 *time changes from California to Australia made it a little a little interesting how to coincide in*  
4 *the same time in this virtual space we're seemingly living these days. As you know the aim of*  
5 *these conversations is basically to just think talk our experiences as educators as we cope with*  
6 *the consequences of the pandemic and then just to create an archive so that we can come back*  
7 *later on and review our thoughts and compare with the thoughts and feelings of other people all*  
8 *over the planet. So, thank you so much for taking the time. The way I'd like to start, Helen, is by*  
9 *you sharing a little bit of your personal, and institutional context. And also, you can tell us a*  
10 *little bit about your institution in terms of the economic context of the students you work with.*  
11 *and whatever else comes to mind so floor is yours!*

12 **01:17 Klæbe** Thank you. So, I'm Helen Klæbe. I'm the Provost Chancellor of Graduate  
13 Research and Development at QUT, which is Queensland University of Technology, in  
14 Brisbane, Australia. My main role as professor there, is to manage the Ph.D. program Ph.D. in  
15 research, master's program for the institution. So, it gives you a little bit of a background on  
16 Queensland University of Technology, which we call colloquially QUT. It's about fifty thousand  
17 students, of which about three thousand are undertaking a PhD or research masters. It is a public  
18 university as nearly every one of the 40 universities in Australia, except for a couple, are not  
19 public universities. So, it's very different to the U.S. They're large institutions, and it's normal

20 kids if you like, when they leave school we'll go to their local university, and our town has about  
21 three or four, and they're all good quality universities. As is quite comprehensive, we don't do  
22 medicine, but we do everything else. So, we do allied health, have large Allied Health, Nursing  
23 Program, and lots of programs like Paramedics and etc. Health and Wellness and, etc. We have  
24 Science Engineering Faculty, which covers everything in science and engineering that you can  
25 possibly think of: from Chemistry right through to Biomedical Engineering. We have the  
26 Education Faculty, Creative Industries Faculty, which covers Architecture and Design and  
27 Fashion right, through to Acting, and Dance, etc. And we also have Law and Business, so, I  
28 think that's all six.

29 **03:21 Gutiérrez** *Comprehensive!*

30 **03:22 Klaebe** Yes. it's quite comprehensive. Like I said, large, with fifty-thousand  
31 students. It's not like the U.S., where you have th campus and people kind of live on campus. It's  
32 a campus city, very much just a campus in the middle of the city, where students come and go.  
33 Most of our students actually come from a lower socioeconomic background: First in family to  
34 go to university. A lot are coming in as mature age students, we have a lot of older age students  
35 who might be working and studying law or something in the evenings, or in the afternoon, that  
36 we've got very flexible learning. So, all our every one of their lectures has to be available online,  
37 for students.

38 **04:15 Gutiérrez** *Oh, this is normal practice?*

39 **04:17 Klaebe** Yeah and all of the readings, everything that they need to access, needs to  
40 be available online, as well for them so they don't kind of run to the library, and fight over each  
41 other to, you know, try to get pages etc. Everything has to be available to them online. But they  
42 have always come in, and come to class and, as well, so, we have a mix of people listening

43 online in class, but also coming for tutorials. So that's the normal setup for undergraduates. And  
44 then it's for me with Ph.Ds. I have Ph.D. students who are situated in hospitals, in research  
45 institutions around the city, but then others go overseas and other institutions they might be  
46 working in other research projects in other parts of the country, in industry. So, it's very flexible,  
47 how we run the program, as well. So, in Australia, if you're doing a Ph.D. you would have  
48 already done an undergraduate and a master's degree, and you come into a program it's a four-  
49 year. So, you don't teach. You might have part-time job, but you generally are not the professor's  
50 assistant to do they want you. You actually just concentrate on doing your project for that time,  
51 and a lot of students are on scholarships to do that. The stipend to support them, just to study  
52 their research.

53 **05:42 Gutiérrez** *Exactly, so its very, very intensive program, so doesn't well what's the size*  
54 *of the university?*

55 **05:47 Klaebe** Fifty thousand. In Australia is quite unique because it's you know we're a  
56 long way away from everywhere but 3% of all research in the world is done by Australians, and  
57 yet GDP globally is like you know less than 1% and 0.3 of a percent of population, if you like,  
58 up the globe, so it's quite a significant amount. And we have a lot of collaborations with  
59 America, South America, Europe and particularly our position that is close to Asia has been, it  
60 has been good, because, as you know, with publishing and joint publishing, it's quite good if  
61 you're into different sectors. So, we think very big on collaborating.

62 **06:36 Gutiérrez** *It's interesting yeah. It's like Australia has this role of like a hinge between*  
63 *two different very different regions. That's, that's right.*

64 **06:49 Klaebe** I'm just gonna say about my background, as you know, is some  
65 storytelling. So, my research is in transmedia storytelling, particularly, so telling stories across

66 multiple platforms, and so I'm doing a lot of work at the moment for my research project, which  
 67 I have an Australian Research Council grant, which is given out by the Australian Government.  
 68 And that is to look at engaging communities in arts and cultural arts storytelling projects in the  
 69 poorest parts of Australia. So, highest unemployment, lowest socio-economic parts of far  
 70 western Queensland, so this is this is very small regional rural communities, high indigenous,  
 71 you know, most kids don't go to school. Won't pass passed, you know, year 12 or past high  
 72 school, and also the top of Tasmania, which I don't know if you know, but Tasmania is the little  
 73 Island write down your bottom...

74 **07:54 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, Yeah. I'm picturing it...*

75 **07:57 Klæbe** Yeah, and that has a very high, high unemployment of young people,  
 76 maybe three generations who've been on some kind of benefits. So, it's a very difficult area to get  
 77 work. So, we're doing approach down there, as well so, that's what I do in my spare time. But,  
 78 yeah, my kind of managing the Ph.D. program across the....

79 **08:19 Gutiérrez** *I know you've been quite involved in administration. But just to do some  
 80 work in the classroom then?*

81 **08:26 Klæbe** I hardly do any work in the classroom because what I need to do is I do a  
 82 lot of facilitating in community projects now, through the research and just supervising of course  
 83 my own students.

84 **08:43 Gutiérrez** *Yes, wonderful. Helen I can help it, but I'm looking at the background that  
 85 you have [in this conference]. Such a lovely background, with the ocean and all of that... but  
 86 Australia has been having difficult times, with all the fires, and now the Covid happens,*

87 **08:55 Klæbe** You know we've had terrible time with bars last year and a lot of natural  
 88 resources burnt, yeah. the Covid is even more challenging, and I'm sure it's the same, I'm

89 interested to hear what it's like from you, out there, but of course Australia's been in lockdown  
90 now for a while. We've had about four weeks, five weeks, and we had been very lucky to have  
91 been able to not only flatten the curb; we've almost eradicated any cases now. So, we're only  
92 getting in our state some days we're not having any, some days we are having one or two. So,  
93 very, very, very low numbers now. Australia was very quick, particularly in areas that had  
94 indigenous communities, to lock down those very quickly, so they were the first ones to lock  
95 down, so they just road blocked we. Australia is a huge continent, as you know, but we've even  
96 blocked between states so you can't go across the border to other states. And all the cases that we  
97 have had, basically two thirds of them have come from people coming off cruise-ships, or  
98 coming back from overseas.

99 **10:14 Gutiérrez** *Imagine that, yeah, yeah.*

100 **10:15 Klaebe** Right. So, we're just starting to think now how we're going to be able to  
101 open the country, but they you know that government has put in enormous amount of money into  
102 having job keeper schemes, you know, paying people to still be connected to their job, but not  
103 work. So, basically on furlough, as you would call it in the States. And the government has asked  
104 us all to download an app, so it's a tracing app, that we have on that phone. So, it runs off  
105 Bluetooth which, you know, people are worried a little bit about their privacy, but of course, if  
106 you catch, you know, you or by being on Amazon everybody already knows everything about  
107 you. But exactly about five or six million people have already downloaded this app, and of  
108 course it was tried in Singapore, and Singapore actually has quite, has had quite good success  
109 with it. But it said it's an app that basically, if I see you, and we're in, I don't know, you and we're  
110 in a shopping center together, and we spend more than 15 minutes in the same vicinity, and then  
111 you turn out to have Covid19 down the track, the phone knows all the phone numbers...

112 **11:28 Gutiérrez** ...*Oh, that have been potentially exposed to that individual. That's very*  
113 *smart.*

114 **11:37 Klaebe** Yeah, so it doesn't keep the detail about the person, doesn't keep me you have  
115 been or where you actually came in contact with them, so it's not like the GPS and mapping, so  
116 you don't have to worry about your privacy of being followed, yeah, but it but it's just a tool that  
117 they're using because one of the hardest things in courses for the *Covid Detectives* as they're  
118 calling them, to be able to trace up where people have been...

119 **12:01 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, yes. That's amazing, and that's, that's they the best users of the*  
120 *technology. Unfortunately, we know that we are being followed even if it is only to get*  
121 *advertising, but, but now, with these pandemics, to use technology in that way, it seems to justify*  
122 *the existence of all the satellites that we have around us and everything...*

123 **12:22 Klaebe** And it's really early days like, you know, this you know always going to  
124 be glitches with any app. So, it's actually a great opportunity to try something like this out so I'm  
125 really pleased that people are thinking about that because there go you know the government  
126 saying if you want to go back to the pub, download the app, if you want to go back to the  
127 restaurants download the app so I really kind of bum pushing it that you really need to do that  
128 because if you can do that then we know when there's going to if there's an outbreak again we  
129 can actually do something about it.

130 **12:55 Gutiérrez** *So, you have 50 something thousand students at the University did you*  
131 *lock down their institution for weeks.*

132 **13:01 Gutiérrez** Yeah. We still, we still have no students we have no undergraduate  
133 students at all on campus. So, that was the first thing to happen: the university was shut. There  
134 were no students were allowed in, and what we did is, we had to turn every course that we had -

135 and you can imagine 50,000, six different faculties, thousands and thousands of courses- we  
136 turned them into all art delivered online within 12 days.

137 **13:38 Gutiérrez** *That is so? That means you did have capacity already in place, right?*

138 **13:42 Klaebe** Well we had we had a lot of capacity in place that we have already had  
139 good platforms and we had half of the component, like I said, we had the, we had the ability to  
140 do it, and had done a lot of it. But to turn the whole thing online, including working out ways of  
141 doing work in, you know, as you can imagine in chemistry or physics, you know, hosting rocks  
142 out to people, so they can do their, you know, examination in relation to things, or whatever  
143 people have been coming up with. Amazing innovative ways.

144 **14:21 Gutiérrez** *That is incredible. because that is the main concern for most institutions  
145 that I've talked to. There are many things that we can deliver online but lab work is one that is  
146 always problematic...*

147 **14:34 Klaebe** Very problematic. And it's been problematic too because, of course, we've  
148 got researchers working in labs, so we haven't closed any buildings down. So, staff can still go to  
149 work, but what we have done is tried to basically get rid of most people. So, for instance, I've got  
150 200 people working in my floor. There's probably only five people that have been coming into  
151 work, and I I've been one of them. So, I'm working at home today, but normally, I'm at work, so,  
152 there has been able to be social distancing. So, in the labs for instance, they worked on having  
153 different time frames during the 24 hours, so that they could keep doing work in the lab, and  
154 have time to clean in between each session.

155 **15:22 Gutiérrez** *Mm-hmm. You're going into the winter intersession, right? In a few weeks.  
156 So, how do you feel about your professors and your programs being able to attain the objectives  
157 or the semester. Is that semester of quarter system you have?*



158 **15:39 Klaebe** Semester. So, we've had just finishing off semester one, and we basically  
159 don't have the break like you have, because it's winter. And we roll in June into semester.  
160 They've worked really, really hard. And so, a lot of universities have just been doing a pass-fail.  
161 We haven't decided to go that path for undergraduates. What we have decided to do is that no  
162 one will fail, which is quite unusual. But we've decided, no one will fail, but we will also be able  
163 to give them like a high distinction, distinction, credit. We'll be able to give them, earn a range of  
164 marks. So, I mean I guess that could be problematic at the small end, but we felt that we didn't  
165 want to disadvantage those that were, had been working really hard to be able to have that  
166 differentiation of good GPA. So, as we've been now off we've been online for this semester, next  
167 semester where we'll probably stay online but, look at how we can just bring the lab component  
168 back.

169 **16:58 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, yeah. Maybe staggering... multiplying the sessions of the labs?*  
170 *What would be the strategy?*

171 **17:07 Klaebe** Yeah, it would be to multiply those two have less in them and have rigid  
172 cleaning program in between each session. That would be that that's. What they're looking at but  
173 only what they have found actually is there is a lot that you can do online

174 **17:30 Gutiérrez** *Absolutely. There are elements of process that that are just quite frankly I*  
175 *don't know if I should say impossible to replicate but nowadays I just don't see how you can*  
176 *recreate that kind of experience. But, while we could stay lingering on that topic a little more, I*  
177 *meant to ask you, before I forget, with 50,000 probably have a very many different situations*  
178 *with the students are you facing or some of the students are facing issues with access in terms of*  
179 *not having good quality of connection equipment resources you have some of that going on?*

180 **18:13 Klaebe** Yes, we do, and we have done a few things about that so we've got  
181 emergency loans for students or not even loans. We've got emergency funding for them, they  
182 don't have to pay it back. I'd help them get, you know dongles, or to get Wi-Fi at home or to help  
183 them with their desk setup at home, so, to making sure that they have good internet access. We  
184 also have not closed the university. So, for instance, if you need to get good Wi-Fi, you can come  
185 to the library. There's no one in the library, that will be able to help you, one-on-one, like they  
186 used to, but you can sit there, and get access to the Wi-Fi. So, the whole grounds at the  
187 University, and -you know- this is our winter [*pointing at the sunshine and sea in the*  
188 *background*] so sitting under a tree is you know you can still get perfect Wi-Fi so in that has  
189 been really useful: to make sure that the university hasn't completely closed its doors to anyone.

190 **19:20 Gutiérrez** *So, as I have been fortunate to talk to folks all over the world these days,*  
191 *one thing that I'm learning, and I would like to hear some something from you: is they incredible*  
192 *creativity that is surging, right? To adapt to the situations, and the way people are teaching in*  
193 *Mexico, in Colombia, all over the place, and you can really see how creative and adaptive we*  
194 *get when we need to. So, what of that is going on that the university?*

195 **19:55 Klaebe** I am, well, I guess because I look after the Ph.D., it's, it's a bit different.  
196 But I have been really amazed at the papers that are coming out from academics around the  
197 world, but, you know, I know particularly in Australia, there's been a lot of goodwill of sharing  
198 of information and good ideas on how to do work in the lab, how to change milestones of your  
199 students, how to adapt the pathway and the fieldwork for research. Which I think has been really  
200 innovative. And just the collegiality and sharing of papers, and things like that, and making sure  
201 that there's... everybody has access to as much information as possible, which has been good. I  
202 think what, what surprises me too is about these Zooms. I don't know if you've been zooming,

203 zooming, zooming... but I feel like I'm more connected than ever. And this has been really great  
204 for our students, who, like I said, are off-site and, so they are feeling more like they're part of the  
205 cohort than ever before. So, that's, that's been really good. We've actually been more connected  
206 and more involved in each other's work, which I think has been great.

207 **21:18 Gutiérrez** *Which is incredible. So, when we come out of these weeks and months of*  
208 *emergency, we suspect that we're going to come back to a new normal, right? So, when you think*  
209 *of this in institutional terms what is this going to be doing to your university in your programs?*  
210 *How are they going to look different or similar?*

211 **21:45 Klaebe** One of my colleagues wrote a piece for a paper here this week. Anyway,  
212 he said that it's kind of like a *Kodak Moment* you know we're not going to ever go back to how it  
213 was in the classroom. You know, this is... this has been what everyone said we couldn't do,  
214 we've all had to just do so. All the worries and fears about going online, about being able to  
215 adapt our teaching methodology, and training, and delivery, has really been forced. So, I don't  
216 think we'll ever go back to how things were. And what that means, I hope, is a deeper and richer  
217 engagement through knowing that online does not mean a very dry boring delivery. It still be  
218 well facilitated; the teaching role is actually more important than ever. And, in fact, our  
219 university is putting more resources, but they're taking teachers of some site types of roles. But I  
220 really turn into learning design, and learning design speciality, so, giving staff the time frame to  
221 be able to really work on how they can optimize what they've been able to do so far, I mean, we  
222 can't go back to that. I mean we've got all that. All our high schools, primary schools, everybody  
223 went online in in a matter of weeks. It was incredible. So, we've got now all that material. It is  
224 available from prep-break, from 4-year old programs, right through to university to Ph.D. And  
225 so, if we go back, it would be, I think, a mistake. Because I don't think you can take... put the

226 genie back in the bottle. That's a good but you do not want to have poor quality programs. Online  
227 does not mean taking what you do face to face, and putting it online, as we know, with them  
228 storytelling. Everyone was worried about books dying, you know, and I look now at the  
229 programs that are online podcasting the growth of podcasting, the growth of programs like The  
230 Moth, for instance: People just ferociously having stories part of their life, more so than ever  
231 before. I've got books on my phone that I already know listen to. I've got other ones on my iPad  
232 that I read, you know. I have real books I read as well, you know. I think what was people were  
233 concerned about in the education, space other fields have really taken off, and this is our  
234 opportunity to say: "Okay, well that's what we used to do now, our how are you gonna do this  
235 continually better."

236 **24:48 Gutiérrez**      *Wonderful. Helen Klaebe, thank you so much for your time. It has always*  
237 *been a privilege and a pleasure talking to you. I really thank you for your perspective, from*  
238 *Down Under. I have to confess that one of the things that I do with my students every time is, I*  
239 *present them with a map of the world from the Australian perspective. And the first thing they*  
240 *say is: "It's upside down." I'd say "No, it's not so!" I have to thank all of you [Australians] for*  
241 *that!*

242 **25:17 Klaebe**      Thank you. It is always lovely to see you – thanks so much