

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

Digital Proximities
Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices

Taxi Teaching, in a Different Way

Interview with
Cristina Banfi
Recorded on May 13, 2020

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Digital Proximities 019 Banfi

Cristina Banfi

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:11 Gutiérrez** *Cristinia Banfi, thank you so much for taking the time this busy morning*
3 *for you and these busy, interesting days that we're living. I am really appreciative. I was looking*
4 *at the context, that Argentina is doing well. You know how Argentina has been portrayed*
5 *unfavorably oftentimes, here, and there but then you look at Argentina today, dealing with this*
6 *pandemic, and it seems like you are doing remarkably well within the... comparatively. It is a*
7 *very difficult decisions, the numbers are looking much better than many other nations that are*
8 *claiming to have all kinds of resources or whatnot, and I think that might be because of the*
9 *solidarity that I found and I perceived when I was fortunate to visit your place, not so long ago.*
10 *So, thank you for taking the time. I would love to talk, to hear about, your experience as an*
11 *educator, coping with the Covid. Why don't we start, Cristina, with you telling us a little bit*
12 *about your institutional context, the socio-economic context of your students, and then a little bit*
13 *about yourself and your your trajectory as an instructor in the English language, right?*

14 **01:20 Banfi** Yes, in English Language Education, in general, and education in
15 languages as well. First of all, thank you very much, for inviting me Juan José, it's a pleasure to
16 be able to share some of these experiences. And yes, you're right, Argentina has always been a
17 bit of a bad, bad boy, bad girl in the social and in the world sphere, but we've been taken by
18 surprise by the cautiousness, concern with which measures have been taken because we tend to
19 be a little bit on the reckless side of things, and this time we appear not to be. And it appears to

20 be showing in the positive results, in figures at least for the time being, which is a I mean: it's a
21 good thing that measures were taken early, because that there are number of areas of concern,
22 particularly in those areas where the most disadvantaged people live, where it's very difficult to
23 take certain precautions.

24 **02:32** And those are the ones that are now seeing the greatest rise in numbers of infected
25 people. People who are who are getting sick because of the living conditions. People live very
26 much in proximity, that it's very difficult to establish the hygiene conditions that are required.
27 But on the other hand, you know, we do have a fairly strong medical service, that has been
28 preparing over this time. We've had the advantage over the Northern hemisphere of the
29 forewarning of what was to come so there was time to prepare and there's still preparations going
30 on. In any case, it is very tough, because for many people -and they say about 30 percent of the
31 population- live in informal, working conditions. So they work in industries or sectors where
32 they don't get a salary if they stay at home. So that is very, very challenging.

33 **03:36** They have to go up to work to get paid, and so it's that the economy the debate...
34 between the economy and the protection of individuals health comes down to a very concrete
35 level. It's not the high level, so it's very complicated.

36 **03:59 Gutiérrez** *So, you are on a research position, right? At the university.*

37 **04:01 Banfi** That it's right. I've said this in writing in some publications, we tend to wear
38 many hats here, particularly in education. We've even coined a phrase of a *taxi teacher*, a teacher
39 who goes from one institution to the next within one day -often in public transport not taxis
40 really-- right. And it's, it's partly a problem with the way appointments work for teachers. But I
41 tried to see things, you know, glass half full, rather than half empty. And it does have certain
42 beneficial aspects, that you tend to cross-pollinate the different contexts where you work. And,

43 you know, what you learn in one place, you take to another place, and so on and so forth. So,
44 many years- I worked at the Ministry of Education, and starting in 2007, in the city of Buenos
45 Aires. And I was in charge of the department that deals with languages, and language teaching.
46 Particularly, additional languages, and particularly English; but also, French, Italian, Portuguese,
47 German, and even Chinese. Right, so, I had and I... we also incorporated in recent years, we
48 changed the name.

49 **05:25** When I started working there it was the Department of Foreign Languages and then it
50 became the Department of Additional Languages and it became the Department of Languages
51 and Education, because we were also charged with working with indigenous languages, and with
52 sign language. So, it was everything that has to do with language policy and in particular in
53 education. Right. But because of the many hats we were, I was, I also worked and continue
54 working in teacher education at the University, and a several teacher training colleges. And there
55 I have the chance of working with undergraduates and postgraduate students, who are in English
56 and in other languages as well. And I get to see second hand, if not firsthand, the reality of
57 teaching of languages in schools. Because most of our students work while they study that's...

58 **06:26** This is the peculiarity of our higher education institutions and they work in the jobs that
59 they're training for. So, it's quite different, let's say, from talking to students about the type of
60 work they will be doing once they graduate, as opposed to saying to them, you know. When you
61 teach students in this context, tell me what happens right? So, it has advantages and
62 disadvantages. It means that students take much longer to graduate, because they may take up to
63 10 years to do a four-year course. But it also means that we can take advantage of that
64 experience, and feed it into a work, to get them to reflect on them. So, it's a bit of a pre-service
65 and in-service one. It's quite interesting.

66 **07:20 Gutiérrez** *Yes. You know, most of the training that people get in the real world is like*
67 *that: is in-the-job training. So, that's sure like that so normally you teach in a classroom setting*
68 *right?*

69 **07:35 Banfi** Absolutely. Normally we teach in a classroom setting with zero institutionally
70 provided technology. I've taught in the States and I remember back in the 90s I had always TAs
71 and projectors, and things like that in every classroom. None of that, but in the last few years I've
72 started using technology as a supplement to my classes. So, I created websites and I haven't
73 accepted work that was not digitally submitted for a decade, because I don't want to use paper.
74 So, that allowed me to transition quite easily into this modality, absolutely, absolutely. But even
75 last year, before all this happened, I was, you know, lecturing and running workshops with
76 students using all my material online, okay? So, I would upload files and I would provide them
77 with digital material digital books digital papers everything was digitalized. So, for me it is...
78 that bit wasn't really that much of a challenge.

79 **08:52** Although that for, I know that for many of my colleagues it has been a huge headache.
80 And that's, you know, it's been very complicated for them, because they've not only had to
81 manage, maybe video conferencing and learning, all these new tools, but also -you know-
82 generating a whole load of materials that...

83 **09:17 Gutiérrez** *...that they didn't have really available. What's a socio-economic context*
84 *of your students? Is this a large institution? (For those of us that are not familiar with it).*

85 **09:27 Banfi** There's several institutions. One is the University of Buenos Aires where I
86 teach a postgraduate course, and there, the directive was to stop the teaching altogether, yeah. I'd
87 started a course that it's taught on Saturdays in the MA in translation, there, and the directive is:
88 we start June the 1st. Which I don't think we will be able to, because even though many economic

89 activities have been reopened as of Monday, education and classes appear not to restart and they
90 restart until maybe September...

91 **10:14 Gutiérrez** *Yes, because this is the Winter, right, for you, you have a winter break*
92 *these days?*

93 **10:17 Banfi** In July. Yes, two weeks.

94 **10:28 Gutiérrez** *This was a major, major disruption because you're not done with it.*

95 **10:30 Banfi** Absolutely. We had barely belly started, in most cases we started online.
96 So, for example my my daughter is 16. She've never met her teachers. She's met them online.
97 My son is 12. He's in the final year of primary school, and he barely had a week and I've started
98 some other courses. I teach at the undergraduate level and I met my students on
99 videoconferencing, and I... some of them I won't be meeting in person, because the first term
100 will finish in July. The big debates now is what happens with assessments and with evaluation of
101 these students, because there's been a general directive for schools, from the Ministry of
102 International... Ministry of Education, not to grade students.

103 **11:23 Gutiérrez** *Oh, Ok.*

104 **11:24 Banfi** So, there will be a kind of conceptual assessment, but no grading. And that
105 poses all sorts of problems, and that's generated a debate. It has to do with the different levels of
106 accessibility that students have, and connectivity, and possibility to get the work and, in some
107 contexts, private schools are doing video conferencing for every subject, or for pretty much
108 every subject. State schools are using email, Whatsapp... Some are starting some video
109 conferencing, some, in some cases it's been left up to the individual teacher, to decide what is
110 what, too, they chose to do, and what works for them. Which is good and bad, because it leaves

111 this huge, you know... In some of the institutions where I teach lecturers, have professors that
112 have told their students to take the course next term.

113 **12:35 Gutiérrez** *So, a substantial proportion of your student body might be left behind in*
114 *unattended?*

115 **12:38 Banfi** Personally... my students everyone that was in roll has been attending and
116 attendance is better than it would normally be in person. Because there's no transportation issues,
117 because everyone is at home. Anyway, because they'd allocated those slots too, so you know, I
118 had a class yesterday: of 32 students, 31 students were there. One sent me a message saying she
119 was having a problem with her computer, but they've been remarkable. Absolutely. I think that
120 part of the issue there is that I established that I would teach the classes in the allocated time for
121 the allocated period and I'm there every time, and I expect them to be there. And I start the class
122 on time, and that's not been the case in every situation. Sometimes people choose to rearrange
123 the time and change that...

124 **13:34** And of course I don't have first-year students, that's another advantage, right? My second
125 student in my groups, I teach second years, fourth years, and so, they already are into the rhythm.
126 And they know how things work, and so it's different in that respect. I suspect that first year
127 students, but my husband teaches first year students at some of the same institutions, and he's
128 amazed at the level of participation and responsiveness. And he was particularly pleased when he
129 created breakout rooms, and he found that the students, who in the big group wouldn't talk,
130 started talking. And he couldn't stop them!... these are all adults, right? But they had so much
131 they needed to communicate, he found. And they needed to engage with the other students, that
132 they've never met, because they're first-year students,

133 **14:35 Gutiérrez** *I gather, Cristina that you have all the range of social strata, in your*
134 *courses right?*

135 **14:41 Banfi** Yes and no. There is some level of social selection, anyway. The courses
136 are free. Higher education is free in Argentina. Not post graduate, but undergraduate okay.
137 Which means that's not an issue.

138 **15:06** However English language education, because there's an entrance exam, and there's a
139 requirement of English language proficiency, it tends to have a bit of a more selective
140 population. I.e., most students have studied English privately, they divided at either attended
141 private schools or language schools that are complementary to school. So, there is a level of
142 selection. Another place where I work, and again, the multiple hats -sorry for the- by seeing and I
143 have been advising and working with the private language institute right? And that there is a
144 large network of these Institutes that teach languages extracurricularly, right? And these are
145 schools that function in the evenings, mostly, that teach children teenagers and adults. And that
146 this particular one, has 15 different sites in the city and the suburbs and has 8,000 students

147 **16:10** So we're talking a large organization. Now, for them, it was vital to go digital virtually
148 overnight, you know. We... all the students that didn't have user IDs and didn't have they had to
149 have them because it's a question of economic survival. If they don't provide the service, they
150 don't get paid. And they --interestingly mm-hmm—there is a range there because even though it's
151 a fee paying or going to organize institution, they do get a range of students from the more
152 affluent, to the least affluent. And so, we find for example that in some cases students don't want
153 to show where they live, yeah. And they are using cell phones because they don't have
154 computers, or using, you know, they have to... there's issues with families with more than one
155 kid, because they have... they only have one device. And that is clearly happening.

156 **17:23** We did have a *One Laptop per Child Program* in state schools, in the city of Buenos
157 Aires, and in the national government for secondary schools too, but it... the coverage is not a
158 hundred percent and that happened a while ago. And some of the computers have broken down,
159 and so, there are issues with accessibility to technology. That's definitely.

160 **17:40 Gutiérrez** *Cristina, before we close the interview because it should be short I like to*
161 *steal two or three more minutes. I'd like to get a little bit of your perspective. As to... I don't*
162 *know how you see things, but the way I see it, with some of our colleagues all over the world,*
163 *seeing this... we're not going back to where we were. It's going to be a new normal. We need to*
164 *really change things. So as a pedagogist, as an educator, what are the things that you don't want*
165 *to miss when we go back to that new normal? What are things that need to change, so that we*
166 *can be better prepared for another eventuality?*

167 **18:20 Banfi** Well they are talking about going back to schools, for example, two, three
168 days a week or less. So, I think that what's happened basically, is that we'd be talking about
169 incorporating technology to improve education, for a long time, and out of all the talk if there
170 was an impact of 10%. I think that was a lot made us go from that 10% to 100%. All of a sudden,
171 right? Whether you like it or not, whether you like technology or not, even people have had to do
172 it, right? I think the possibilities, and it's shown the fact that we don't need to all, you know,
173 move around the city, and travel miles every day to get from A to B. And that we can do things
174 in a different way. It is possible to be educated in a different way. It is possible to have access to
175 teachers and to education and to content and to interaction and to learning it in a different way.
176 We've had to think classes differently: we've had to think: "Okay, I'm going to assign some work
177 to students. They're going to do it at home." Then, they're going to come back we're going to to
178 the *flip the classroom* idea, that everybody talked about. And what he did, now is happening and

179 we shouldn't lose that we shouldn't go back to... we shouldn't try to go back to the old normal. I
180 think, some things of the new normal are good, and I like teaching from home. I like to go and
181 meet the students in person, and have some in-person interactions, but this idea that we have to,
182 you know, sit in a place for hours, just to fill a slot. It really doesn't make sense, right? But I'm
183 not sure how much people are thinking about this sort of. That's what worries me, because I'm...
184 and that's where we go back to the beginning of the conversation, where Argentina is the bit of a
185 bad boy, or girl in the world scene. We do not... we tend not to plan for the long term. We tend
186 to plan... we tend to sort out the contingency, and we've survived so many contingencies, and
187 that this one we seem to be doing in a better way...

188 **20:33 Gutiérrez** *I think it's impressive, yeah.*

189 **20:34 Banfi** We're surprised. But what I worry is not about the short term or even the
190 medium term, I worry about the long term. I wonder how many people are thinking about that
191 and I wish more people were asking this sorts of questions. Because I think this would pass. And
192 now it seems like a big deal, but maybe even if it's two years of normality, but things have to be
193 different

194 **21:17 Gutiérrez** *Exactly. Fantastic. Christina, well, thank you very much. I don't want to*
195 *close without telling you that I missed two things of Buenos Aires. One is the good food... but*
196 *your libraries, your bookstores!*

197 **21:19 Banfi** Well, you are welcome to visit whenever it is possible to do that but,
198 interestingly, I'll give you an interesting turn on that of that fact. We have fabulous bookstores
199 we have fabulous places where you can buy books we don't have such wonderful public libraries.
200 We don't have such wonderful academic libraries. In fact, one of the things that I did when I
201 went digital, was I created the digital library for my students. Because the books that they had in

202 the places where I teach, are the books that I used as a student. So, there's no budget for that. So,
 203 there's an issue with copyright and if people are going to think long term people are going to
 204 have to think long term. About the copyright and about access to knowledge, and open access.
 205 And all these open data ideas that people are talking about, and think about them differently for
 206 the first world, and for the third world. Because we may be, whatever unusual world we think
 207 we're in in Argentina, but in that respect we're more third world than anything else. And in its,
 208 it's a big limitation. When you're teaching some cases with the help of pirates and Russia .
 209 People... when you try to get digital books, the place where my students find are Russian
 210 websites, that the Russians have set up, that are pirating sites. It's awful. The books are not even
 211 here in the bookshop. I can't even buy them if I want to. I used to. When I traveled I come home
 212 with suitcases full of books, and then for the students to have them they have to be photocopied.
 213 We had massive photocopy shops where this would be done. Now it's digital.

214 **23:15 Gutiérrez** *Well, good to hear that the Russian are contributing to the classroom in*
 215 *Argentina. Cristina, I know you have a very busy day. I am really thankful for your time.*

216 **23:29 Banfi** Thank you so much and sorry about the Russian invasion. Maybe things
 217 you did not want to know.

218 **23:33 Gutiérrez** *Our heart goes to you and all the Argentinians. I will we're learning from*
 219 *whatever you do which is mutual so in solidarity and it is wonderful to see how you coping with*
 220 *it*

221 **23:43 Banfi** I look forward to seeing you here when we can travel!

222 **23:48 Gutiérrez** *That would be lovely. Thank you so much.*

223 **23:50 Banfi** Ok. Thank you. Bye, bye...

224 [Music]