

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

Digital Proximities
Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices

No Pasarse: Let's Not Overdo It

Interview with
Niels Willemsen
Recorded on May 13, 2020

Juan José Gutiérrez
School of Social, Behavioral and Global Studies

Digital Proximities 020 Willemsen

Niels Willemsen

Recorded on May 13, 2020

1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:19 Gutiérrez** ... and yes! Niels, thank so much for taking the time. It is morning in
3 California afternoon, I believe, in your neck of the forest. Why don't we start by me asking you to
4 talk a little bit about yourself, your institutional context, your background -disciplinary and
5 otherwise-- and if you can tell us how are things going on in the Netherlands?

6 **00:46 Willemsen** Ok well, thanks. My name is Neils Willemsen. I'm a lawyer and I am also
7 a barrister which is I think the correct word in the United States in context, so, I practice law as
8 well. Well, after a couple of years I realized that I wanted to do something different, and I
9 combined my practical job with the work in the educational field. Later on, it turned out to be,
10 well, exactly what I wanted to do, so it became a full-time job. So, I'm a lecturer, I do some
11 research for my University, and I'm also the *privacy guy*, you know, because I'm a lawyer, so, I
12 know something about privacy! You know, something. That sums it all up.

13 **01:43** I have to emphasize that I truly love working with students. So, at my institution we work
14 with students that are approximately between 16 and 24 years old or young, depends on your
15 perspective, and I teach in the Business Administration. I also worked for an insurance company,
16 really briefly. It was not my kind of thing. I also did --but that's ages ago-- I also did
17 professional education: people who already has a job, and in the evenings come to our institution
18 to learn more. I think it's good to emphasize as well that Avans University, that is my university,
19 has approximately 30,000 students. That means that we, by law, are allowed to hand out bachelor

20 degrees. In the European context that is level six, and then level seven is Master's, and the eighth
21 is Ph.D. So, we hand out bachelor degrees after four years, more less, four years of education.
22 We also have some master degrees that's a bit technical: my area is Business Administration,
23 HR.

24 **03:11 Gutiérrez** *So, where are you more comfortable? You know, are you more*
25 *comfortable in front of the students or in front of the judge?*

26 **03:17 Willemsen** Well, that is good, that is good... They have something in common: and
27 that's a bit partly to admit, and to say, but yes, both places have some kind of theater aspect.
28 Going along with them, yes, to play a role.

29 **03:39 Gutiérrez** *Absolutely.*

30 **03:40 Willemsen** Seeing yourself of course. As a lawyer, you wearing the gown, so you're
31 not completely yourself. You're speaking on behalf of a role, a function. But as a teacher, you
32 have to entertain as well. You have to be really good at talking, and keeping attention, because
33 just that's very similar as in court but the distinction is that the context with students is likely to
34 be a lot more positive. You were working towards well help people to take the next step for
35 example. It's a bit more positive. In court you are solving someone else's problems, basically,

36 **04:29 Gutiérrez** *That's right, that's right. I can see that. Let's move on to this issue of what*
37 *happened. You're teaching in the classroom, normally, and then Covid 19 happens, right? So,*
38 *was this is nine weeks ago, eight weeks ago, I don't, I'm not sure when did it happen. Did you*
39 *stop teaching or you...?*

40 **04:54 Willemsen** Just a week before all the rules of confinement were well rolled out
41 throughout society, I was in Denmark. So, I was just teaching, just before the crisis. I was in
42 Denmark at another University and was teaching their real face to face, real time classes. And the

43 weeks before all this [Covid 19] lands, just doing business, doing business as usual. We had
44 some trainings, so training in our context is that you teach students skills and you help them to be
45 more professional. And it's a more soft approach. and I also do more art courses like law and
46 stuff like that. So, we had a lot of face-to-face contact, and that that suddenly, just, it was gone.
47 And we needed to adapt, which was for me... it was fun in a way. And later on, all the problems
48 popped up, of course, the technical issues, and people missing out on meetings, or they couldn't
49 connect online, or whatever. All these issues, yes. Teams, Microsoft Teams, the mandatory
50 platform for staff and students to use, did a really good job. I have to say that they really, really,
51 did a good job. So, it's very stable, even with classes of 100 students, 150 students. It's works
52 really, really, well. So, yeah.

53 **06:38 Gutiérrez** *Do you teach those large classes?*

54 **06:41 Willemsen** Yeah, I do. Although, those large groups no, I haven't done, so far. My
55 groups about 30-40 students, and the smallest 5/6, more or less. Yes.

56 **06:59 Gutiérrez** *Those are wonderful courses. When you have a group of students and
57 you're working with them really enjoyable. And you know the large crowds are interesting too
58 but it's a different challenge all together, right? So, in terms of... Do you have a sense of how are
59 your students coping with the change? Are they happy, are they nervous about not being able to
60 attain the objectives of the semester? Were you able to finish your semester? (Are you in a
61 quarter system or semester system?)*

62 **07:25 Willemsen** We have a quarter system in Business Administration. HR is using the
63 semester option. I think my students are really stressed out. Specially their they were really
64 stressed out: "Am I going to finish it, and will I will I be obtaining the grade that I would have
65 obtained if things would have been normal? Can I move on to the to the university, so the

66 academic university with this in this situation? How will the exams be aligned? Will they be
67 proctored?" Stuff like that. So, they are stressed out. On the other hand, it depends on the
68 mindsets as well, at least from my perspective. So, the students that I know a bit better --because
69 I'm also coaching with small group of 50 students throughout the four-year program-- and those
70 who I might know bit better, with the good mindset, they're just really flexible and positive
71 towards it. And they also have teachers out their flexible: "Okay, so if there are kids at home,
72 let's do the lecture," I don't know. If 4 o'clock or in the evening or really early in the morning so
73 it depends... the big, was the word? Differentiator, is communication at all on how we
74 communicate with these boys and girls so if we use really clear words and sentences and then
75 they are really flexible but if we communicate in a way that is vague and open-ended so words
76 like, well we are going to solve this for you, not enough it's not enough they want to have a
77 specific date, specific means, whatever so that's it.

78 **09:41 Gutiérrez** *...and, how about you in terms of your own practice? You are asked one*
79 *day to stop going to the physical classroom, and then, I imagine that you have to resort to all*
80 *kinds of strategies. Where you already transitioning into using digital tools for your teaching?*
81 *How much does your personal experience with it?*

82 **09:55 Willemsen** Well, I was a little bit lucky because, with some colleagues I already work
83 along with the Finnish University, and we were preparing a lot of online materials. You're using
84 all kinds of software to make screencasts, podcasts, and support and so on, so we have we had an
85 advantage there, technically. At the other end, you still have to align yourself with the group of
86 students. You have to, you know, you have to empathize with them as well. And that's really
87 hard to a camera and with groups larger than, I don't know, ten students, more or less, I think
88 tens what that's

89 **10:46 Gutiérrez** *Little squares, right?*

90 **10:48 Willemsen** Yes. Some of them are in their beds, some are in their home trainers...

91 some of them are really concentrated and trying to take notes, it's... In the beginning it is what it

92 was a mess, to be honest. Later on, what that did got more, well, serious, and less what is the

93 word ashamed or shy...

94 **11:18 Gutiérrez** *...or shy yes, yes, that's right. So, we get used to these devices, and we just*

95 *performed to it, yes. That was a major issue with someone my colleagues. It is the performance*

96 *on a different medium. Because we, as you well said, we're performing when we're teaching. But*

97 *it is different than wanting it to be perfect when I control. I say: "No, just keep recording!" But*

98 *it takes some time getting used to it, yes. Let's go back to what you were say because it's really*

99 *interesting. So, this human connection that we definitely have the immediacy of the physical*

100 *space when it is media it becomes a different animal and sometimes it becomes nothing so How*

101 *are you coping with that? What are your feelings about this type of education?*

102 **12:11 Willemsen** I'm in doubt, I have to admit. On the one hand, I'm really in favor of using

103 technology, distance learning, using all kinds of software tools, because it's fun. And, on the

104 other hand, I'm really, really skeptical, because I do know that without... but it's intuitively right-

105 - I do know that with the students that I connect most, it has to be real life. I have to look at them

106 in the eye, and know. And then I can actually see whether they understood what I said or that

107 they, you know... the students of this day, when they don't understand what you're saying... they

108 have this, this... I don't know this look or this... In the classroom you can you can see that.

109 Whether they're shifting in their chair or all these micro things... And online, that's impossible, so

110 I can, I can use all these stupid questions like: "Did you understand what I said before?"

111 Obviously, some of them aren't shy, and they just overrule me. "I didn't get it." So, I think what

112 we've learn from this episode is... I don't know the English word but in Spanish is *No pasarse*,
113 ¿no?

114 **13:44 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, yeah, sorry, don't overdo it!*

115 **13:57 Willemsen** Part of this conversation could be Spanish lessons, yes, Spanish lessons.
116 We have to have a mix of flipping the classroom. Like people can students can consume
117 knowledge-based lectures online, but then, I do really need to see them in class, and I think
118 students do so as well, I think.

119 **14:26 Gutiérrez** *I really like the fact that is real life practice, in your professional life, and
120 then you come to the classroom. It's situational, we are embedded only in the classroom. We lose
121 a little bit of the sense of reality out there, so: borrowing from that positionality that you have I
122 guess the question is: many of us are thinking of the fragility of the systems we depend on. It
123 seems incredibly robust, on one hand, making technology and the places we live, in the practice
124 that we do... all of that is incredible. But, it is such a fragile system, as we are experiencing right
125 now. So, out of this being confronted with the fragility of our systems, what are your thoughts
126 about what the university needs to go back to? I don't think we should go back to exactly where
127 we were before, but we cannot just throw away everything we were before. So, what is your
128 perspective? What would you like to see changing and staying of your experience as a professor
129 at the University?*

130 **15:41 Willemsen** I truly hope that the incentive for enhancing the, well, what is the word,
131 the level of sustainability, healthcare, all these topics that are at least in the Business
132 Administration curriculum are not that present, I hope they will be more interlinked more
133 consciously like the students. So, the vulnerability you mentioned, I relate it that to as a Business
134 Administration student, you need to be aware, you need to be aware of the world around you. It's

135 great that you have the skills to manage your company, and take a look at financial aspects of a
136 company, and so for. But there is so much more to it: it's not only about profit, it's about, well, is
137 this company you're going to work for or the startup you're going to embrace are you capable
138 making it well sustainable? Take care of the humans that are working there? Do you have
139 empathy skills? and stuff like that.

140 **16:54** I hope from the content-wise perspective that my university will well, more or less, force
141 these topics in the curricula, on the one hand, and I also hope that we embrace technology on the
142 one hand, but be really cautious as well with technology. I'm afraid that budget-wise as we call
143 them in the Netherlands *people in suits*. The *people in the suits* will say: "Well, See? The
144 educational field is really good at adapting really rapidly, and now let's do everything online and
145 let's do a lot of budget cuts on physical classes" for example. Because they are, if you take a look
146 at the financial part of Education and the budget costs coming out from the Ministry of
147 Education -----that's not a secret-- so it's all already I am pretty afraid that you'll say well "let's
148 get 50% -for instance- of all physical classes. Just record everything, put it online and that's it."
149 That's a more cynical approach to be honest.

150 **18:17 Gutiérrez** *I agree that we can gain in efficiencies, but it should not be at the expense*
151 *of what is the core of our practice, and our mission, which is to endow the new generation with*
152 *the tools that they're going to need to face the challenges. So now we're going to be facing,*
153 *apparently, more and more in the future. Because like it's coming quite a bit frequently...*

154 **18:50 Willemsen** More frequently perspective is, in the education everybody is really proud
155 of themselves now because we did this so fast, and everything is so good, but from the student
156 perspective, it's completely different. In a sense that the student perspective is just: "Well these
157 guys just did some video calls, and made a screencast, yeah... who cares!" They were raised

158 with online material, they were raised with video, they were raised with guys in YouTube
159 explaining things, so the things we did are good, but they don't have the same as a YouTube
160 explaining things...

161 **19:33 Gutiérrez** *That is right... Okay and not too keep these conversations too long, so*
162 *that when we get people get to watch this they don't reject the number of minutes. But I want to*
163 *thank you.*

164 [Music]