

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

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

Decision Making in Times of Uncertainty: Worse than an  
Earthquake

Interview with  
Fran Horvath  
Recorded on June 10, 2020

Juan José Gutiérrez  
School of Social, Behavioral and Global Studies

Digital Proximities 022 Horvath

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:10 Gutiérrez** *Thank you thank you so much for taking the time I know how busy these*  
3 *weeks and months now have been for you so I'm really thankful for your time and for making the*  
4 *time to have this conversation. As you probably know, I've been doing these interviews to try to*  
5 *create a normal record of the things that we have been living these weeks. I really believe, as we*  
6 *all do, that this is a "before and after" moment, and I thought that it was important to try to*  
7 *create these memories, right? For us to come back later on. So, I would like to just get started by*  
8 *asking you to introduce yourself to people who do not know you. A little bit of your background,*  
9 *your personal background, your training, your institutional context, and, very importantly, your*  
10 *social context: the students are that you serve in your institution.*

11 **01:03 Horvath** Okay, sure, and first of all, thank you, because I think this is very  
12 important. I'm glad you're doing this because, you're right, I mean as, right now, I'm starting to  
13 forget what it was like, much less, you know, two years from now I won't remember any of this  
14 or I'll have blocked it out. So, my background is... I started out actually as a as a Biology major  
15 and I have a degree in Marine Environmental Science, and a lot of people don't know that,  
16 because I actually have spent my entire professional career in administration. And So, I started  
17 out in institutional research and I eventually branched out into planning, and from there, I ended  
18 up working for a couple of institutions as basically the person who did accreditation, space  
19 planning, academic planning, and institutional research. I worked for 10 years at the Naval Post  
20 Graduate School, which is in Monterey, California. I've worked for the past six and a half years  
21 here at CSU Monterey Bay. This last year we, unfortunately, lost our Provost to a much better

22 and bigger position. She's a chancellor now, and so, I was given the opportunity to become the  
23 Interim Provost here, and it's been an amazing opportunity, and an amazing challenge at the  
24 same time. It's a wonderful opportunity to be able to grow. I always enjoy being able to grow in  
25 all of my positions...

26 02:35

27 **00:00 Gutiérrez** *I don't know that you could have chosen a "better" time to step on that*  
28 *(position) oh my goodness!*

29 **02:40 Horvath** Well, thank you. Yeah, just to talk a little bit about what CSU Monterey  
30 Bay is, because for those who don't know, this is a CSU, a regional institution. There are 23  
31 campuses in our system, and we're one of them. We're located in the Central Coast of California  
32 -literally on the coast. You can walk half a mile downhill from this building that's behind me,  
33 and you'll be at the beach. So, the Monterey Bay dominates a lot of what we do. We have a very  
34 strong Marine Science Program but the CSUs, in particular Monterey Bay, are dedicated to  
35 students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, who come from backgrounds that perhaps  
36 they did not have opportunities. Our students are the students who are using education as a way  
37 of leveraging up from more disadvantaged poorer backgrounds, to get ahead economically and  
38 socially. And this is a mission that resonates with me very strongly, because I actually have an  
39 immigrant background as well. My parents, they are both immigrants from many generations  
40 back. So, it's completely different generation, but I'm, you know, first generation American  
41 myself. So, using education -my father had a grade school education- using education as a way  
42 of moving up in the world is very resonant with me. And so, a lot of our students do that. And  
43 it's... we provide and I want to, you know, emphasize that we have a high-quality education  
44 here. I know, sometimes people think state institutions they take in anybody, and they don't have

45 high quality. But that's not true. We have your own department has tremendous scholars in it, we  
46 have a very fine Marine Science Program as I mentioned, Computer Science Business. We have  
47 a really well-rounded program here. And our students go on to bigger and better things. So, it's a  
48 really wonderful mission to have.

49 **04:46 Gutiérrez** *So, a typical family from CSU Monterey Bay, like an average family... you*  
50 *have students from all different walks of life, right? When you think about families, what comes*  
51 *to mind?*

52 **04:58 Horvath** Well, you know, especially when we're talking about our local families  
53 and we have a draw here. Our freshmen tend to come from Southern California, but our transfer  
54 students tend to come from the local community here. And when you're talking about our  
55 students, you're talking about families many of whom are first generation students themselves;  
56 many of whom started out in their families speaking not English as their primary language, but  
57 many of them speak Spanish as their primary, first language. Or they have parents or  
58 grandparents who primarily speak Spanish or another language. So, that's a very typical kind of  
59 family for us, and we do have a good number of students whose families work in the fields, who  
60 work in, you know, those kinds of labor-intensive activities. And so, their children many times  
61 are the first ones coming into the university. We also have a very high percentage of our students  
62 who are dependent on financial aid, and Pell Grants, so we're very much not a wealthy  
63 community here.

64 **06:07 Gutiérrez** *So: You're beginning a typical busy semester, with searches, and all these*  
65 *things going on, and then COVID19 happens. So, how was the experience for you?*

66 **06:21 Horvath** Well, it's interesting I think back on it, you know, I think at the very  
67 beginning I'm remembering back to January, you know, when things were first starting to come

68 out, and we still were in this this mindset of, you know, it's no worse than the flu... this is just  
69 another version of the flu it's going to come. "It's going to go, they're making a big deal out of  
70 nothing" and as the weeks went on, it became clearer and clearer that this wasn't nothing, that  
71 this was different than just the flu; that this was going to be considerably more impactful. And  
72 even then, we weren't, we weren't positive about the extent of it. I remember when the county,  
73 the Monterey County locked down, put us into shelter-in-place, and we all thought it'll be a  
74 couple of weeks, and we'll be back. Nothing true... So many of us just took enough materials for  
75 a couple of weeks' worth of work. We didn't think about setting up our homes as offices we  
76 didn't think of any of those practical things. And so, that was like my first recollection of what  
77 we were dealing with. One of the things I will tell you about this, the ongoing challenge even  
78 now, is the intense amount of uncertainty. that's part of it. As we worked as an institution, you  
79 know, most institutions have plans for how they're going to deal with emergencies. You have an  
80 Emergency Operations Center, you've got plans laid out. But a lot of times the thought process  
81 around it is about a point in time. So, like if we had an earthquake, we would have it and then we  
82 would move on. Yes, there would be aftershocks, but it wouldn't be, you know, it would be this  
83 major event and then we'd move on from there. This is very different: it doesn't stop. You don't  
84 move on. You sit there, and you crack case numbers, and you track deaths, and you worry about,  
85 you know, what's going to happen. And you try to figure out how do you plan. When you have  
86 no idea what's going to happen, it's a very difficult and different situation to be in administration.

87 **08:41 Gutiérrez** *So, towards the middle of March, right, that's when the university had to*  
88 *have to closed. So, what are the pieces that are moving for you? What are the decisions that you*  
89 *have to start making those days? Aside from sending us all to go home.*

90 **08:59 Horvath** Well, you know first of all one of the decisions we had to figure out was  
91 how are we going to deal with the fact that we're asking the faculty to basically, most of them  
92 didn't teach virtual -we're a face-to-face campus primarily- and so, what kind of time? -you  
93 know- How can we figure out a reasonable way to address the need for faculty to take some time  
94 and figure out what to do with their courses? At the same time, give our students the opportunity  
95 to finish their term, to get their credits. So, those were the decisions early on. Trying to figure out  
96 we ended up closing basically for a Friday, plus the following whole week, so that faculty... We  
97 weren't closed the students weren't in classes, but faculty had the opportunity to start working on  
98 converting their classes. And, again, they didn't know how long we were going to do this. We're  
99 still in the, oh it's going to be two-week mode in our head. So, those were some of the decisions  
100 we started making. We started having to think about, you know, how would we deal with the  
101 students who were in residence halls? They had to suddenly have to social-distance. How are we  
102 going to do this on campus? What was going to be open? What had to close right away? I think  
103 for us, I will mention that for me the one very tough, tough part about this was understanding  
104 how much we had to communicate. And again, that is partly things were changing, sometimes on  
105 an hourly basis, sometimes certainly on a daily basis. And we were trying to always keep up with  
106 the communication, and it was so hard to make sure you communicated with everybody. You  
107 send something out to a student, and you have to remember: "Hey, the faculty need to know  
108 about this too." Because the students will come to the faculty, and so you need to try and catch  
109 up. And sometimes you'd fail, and sometimes you'd go: "Oh, darn. We didn't get it out to the  
110 faculty. Okay let's catch up with that." And so, communication was very, very difficult. And if  
111 there's anything, as I think about, and right up, the next plans for the next crisis we deal with.  
112 Dealing with communication is number one on my list,

113 **11:22 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, because you need to provide not just, uh, not just connect with the*  
114 *right people, but the frequency of it. Because if you give too much, it can become chaotic, and if*  
115 *you get too little, then people will get anxious. And so, it's I think the emotional component of all*  
116 *of these um ways bigly right in the things that we do.*

117 **11:40 Horvath** Yes, yes. And that was another thing, you know, the other the other part  
118 that we had to remember. Again, it's different from a point of time impact like an earthquake.  
119 This, with its ongoing nature, impacted our students and our faculty in so many ways, you know.  
120 People having to care for children because the school is closed, or students having to be at home  
121 and away from campus. We're primarily a residential campus, so, students suddenly having to be  
122 sheltering in place at home with, potentially, siblings and parents, and where do they find space  
123 to study? There were a lot of emotional impacts. This was tough for people to deal with it wasn't  
124 just business as usual. It wasn't simple in any way.

125 **12:27 Gutiérrez** *Absolutely, absolutely. So, in terms of preparedness: How well prepared*  
126 *you feel your institution was to cope with it?*

127 **12:38 Horvath** I think we were pretty well prepared. I mean, we already had an  
128 emergency team that that had been set up for many years. So, we have an Emergency Operations  
129 Center and we're connected in to the county so, that had already been in place for years. And we  
130 were well connected -immediately- to the County Health Officer. We were very fortunate that -I  
131 want to say within the last year- we had hired a very excellent Risk Manager. That function  
132 proved to be extremely important, so we were really well positioned. And I think a lot of it as I  
133 say, was this learning experience of having to deal with something with the uncertainty. That  
134 was the part... and it's tough, to deal with uncertainty. No matter what you do, no matter how  
135 well prepared you are, because of course you can't be prepared for uncertainty by its very nature.

136 It's not possible. So, I think just dealing with a virus was different because like if you have an  
137 earthquake, you have a hurricane, you have a storm, you don't have to worry about things like  
138 disinfecting. You don't have to worry about things like people not being in contact with each  
139 other. And, in fact, those very things that's I think another big part of this, is that we're really  
140 realizing how much people need to contact people. We really need that personal contact. And if  
141 you were in the middle of a, you know, after a hurricane, you'd be able to come over and hug  
142 your neighbors, and hug your students, and you'd be able to... You can't do that. You can't touch  
143 them, you can't go near them. It's very difficult...

144 **14:20 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, yeah. So, if you don't mind me asking, how has your everyday life*  
145 *changed? Because now your staff is not next to you. You're confined. How did you manage? How*  
146 *did your everyday life change?*

147 **14:39 Horvath** Well. I'll tell you. I don't want to do some Zoom, because obviously  
148 it's helped us a lot be able to connect and keep connected. But it is exhausting. You do find  
149 yourself, you know, all of a sudden, where a phone call or an email would have been enough,  
150 people keep wanting to Zoom all the time. And when you've had a day, like especially during the  
151 semester. Right now, my life is calming down. The semester is finished, you know, grades are in.  
152 We're really starting to get into the summertime. Faculty are off contract. It's very much calmer.  
153 But in the heat of the semester, especially during the, you know, during the peak of the COVID  
154 crisis, there were all these extra meetings added on top of all of the normal activities. So, we had  
155 to try and run the university in its normal way. On top of all of this covered meeting and all this  
156 planning and doing and so there would be many days when you know you'd start at 7 or 7 30  
157 with a Zoom meeting and you wouldn't finish until six or seven at night, and there'd be Zoom  
158 meetings one after another. And nobody says, you know, "Oh I need to walk from Building A to



159 Building B, because you don't, you're right here, you know... At some point you go: "I've been  
160 in six hours of Zoom meetings today, or seven hours, I'm tired, I don't want to do this anymore."  
161 And it's interesting because it's weird. It's like when, you know, somebody already it's not too  
162 bad. Talking to people who are complete strangers on Zoom. Is a little more difficult because  
163 you can't make a mental connection to the person that you're talking. But it's also so much more  
164 intimate, like you and I like I'm looking at your face right now, and I can see it so clearly. And so  
165 closely, but if you and I were in a meeting on campus, we'd be across the room from one another,  
166 you know, and there'd be a group of people, right? So, in a personal sense, it can be very  
167 draining. But at the same time, and it's one of those things where you feel like, you know, "When  
168 do I have time to get the work done" because I'm so busy reading. So, you learn. You learn to  
169 adjust and fortunately, you do put in a lot of, just like you would do in a normal work situation,  
170 where you have regular standing meetings. I never gave up my standing meetings, so I met with  
171 staff on a regular basis and you also, one of the things I think that we did do, that was really  
172 important to us, was that we didn't do this immediately. Which I would change if we were going  
173 to ever go through this again but somewhere around april-ish, you know, we started doing more,  
174 -and by we I mean the president, and some members of the cabinet- we do it with different  
175 groups. We would do large open town halls on Zoom with students, with faculty, with staff, and  
176 that and I think that really helped a lot. But again, it's all more stuff that you've got to do.

177 **17:40 Gutiérrez** *Yeah, you find the time and all of that is sitting in front of a desk, probably*  
178 *in front of a computer... our eyes!*

179 **17:47 Horvath** Right, you know, it's like it took me a while I mean it kind of took me a  
180 while to say why am I so tired all the time and I realized that in a normal day I would be at my  
181 computer for a little bit then I would walk over to my table, and I would have a meeting with

182 somebody. And my days were meetings. And so, I would have lots of one-on-ones or meetings  
183 with groups. I would walk to some place or, you know, I would move around a lot. And this is a  
184 very confining activity. There's no place, there's no place to go. You don't need to go anywhere,  
185 and so it really was important to make sure that you take care of mind and body: get out and, you  
186 know what it's like. I was grateful that shelter-in-place did not prevent us from getting out and  
187 walking. And, you know, doing those kinds of things, just to relieve the mind.

188 **18:33 Gutiérrez** *You have um i don't know probably 80 percent of your courses were face-*  
189 *to-face if not more I'm not sure what numbers (93!) I knew it was really high, the number. And*  
190 *so, in two weeks comes the realization to all of us, it dawns on us, that this is going to stay. How*  
191 *did the transition this semester happened? Did it go well? Did the students and the faculty carry*  
192 *on in good ways? How do you assess the second half of the semester?*

193 **19:12 Horvath** Well, it was a challenge. I won't say it wasn't. I think the faculty really  
194 rose to the challenge. I mean, the reports that I've gotten, the faculty really stepped up, god bless  
195 them, they did a really, an amazing job. Really put out a tremendous amount of work. Our  
196 faculty are very dedicated to students, you know, their hearts and souls are with the students, and  
197 student success. Now, you know, it's, I'm going to tell you, in reality it's mixed, you know. It's  
198 like what can you do in five days or six days as you try to turn? Yes, a lot of it was, you know,  
199 Zoom sessions and so forth, and some of our students struggled as I said. Some of our students,  
200 and some of the faculty, you know, if they had children, they suddenly had to take care of. How  
201 do they deal with that as they're trying to do their classes? How do you keep a quiet environment  
202 so that you can Zoom with students and just the whole thing of getting used to Zoom. Most of us  
203 hadn't zoomed all that much. So it's like, and even now, I am not a Zoom expert, so when  
204 somebody will mention: "Oh, you know, it's like it's a blackboard feature, and like a

205 whiteboard.” I’m like there’s a whiteboard and learning the differences. You can do a webinar,  
206 you can do 300 people in the Zoom meeting. And I’m like we’ve had 300 people on halls. It’s  
207 quite amazing. And the faculty had to figure all that out. We do have an amazing Center for  
208 Academic Technology. They were there helping. We have our Teaching Learning and  
209 Assessment folks. They were in there, helping. And our students, I know, reported mixed. Some  
210 of our students could acclimate very easily, some of our students really struggled. A lot of our  
211 students they really need that face-to-face, that face-to-face contact. They really need a  
212 concentrated kind of environment when you’re in a classroom, you don’t have distraction as  
213 much. When you’re in a classroom, you’re there, with a teacher. It’s a very different thing when  
214 you’ve got pets and children and siblings...

215 **21:25 Gutiérrez** *Yeah. How about the digital divide? Do we have problems with students*  
216 *having issues with accessing the sessions and connectivity, and all of those issues that we take*  
217 *for granted?*

218 **21:36 Horvath** Oh yes, absolutely. Specially because Monterey County has it’s a very  
219 large county. The areas that are urban in Monterey are very concentrated kind of in the northern  
220 part of the county. And then the county itself stretches out into rural and farming communities  
221 for a long distance, and a lot of those rural and farming communities and mountainous areas  
222 have very little Internet connection and so we had just had to try to figure out how we could get  
223 our students connectivity. So, we loaned out hot spots, we’ve bought a number of hot spots for  
224 students. Loaned them out. We had to loan them out to faculty as well. Not all the faculty had a  
225 good connection. We tried to make sure that we did some upgrading to the... we have a local  
226 residence area that the institution owns where a lot of the faculty live, it’s called East Campus,  
227 and we did as much as we could to upgrade the Internet there. We had loner computers for

228 people who had no computers, so we had to kind of do that, you know, as best we could during  
229 that semester. And so now, as we're getting ready for the Fall, we're continuing to think about  
230 how we can even further upgrade? What can we do to improve that situation? Because it's still  
231 out there. Our students don't all have access to computers, or where they don't all have access to  
232 their own computer, they might have one computer in the house and everybody so it's not that  
233 easy. It's like we're we tend to think we're all very digital, and the reality is that a lot of our  
234 students are digital, but on a phone, and it's not really easy to do a class on a phone. So, it doesn't  
235 work well, it doesn't.

236 **23:23 Gutiérrez** *As you know, I have to I need to keep this these conversations to a certain*  
237 *length and this is just so fascinating, I can lose track of time, easily. But I really don't want to*  
238 *close without getting a little bit of your perspective. You know I'm enthusiastic about how*  
239 *challenging this time has been for one and one reason only: it is that I can see opportunity to*  
240 *revisit the things that we have done thinking that is the only way to visualize opportunities for*  
241 *new ways of engaging with students, for ways of solving issues that we have had persistently in*  
242 *the past, even the footprint that we exert institutionally on our communities. So, I would like to*  
243 *get a little bit of your perspective on it as an educator, as a pedagogist, as an administrator:*  
244 *What do you see as the main challenges and the main opportunities that we have? Are there*  
245 *things that we can... that you see changing in the future, that we can adopt as “okay this was*  
246 *good this wasn't that bad after all”?*

247 **24:32 Horvath** Yes, I think I've talked a good deal about some of the challenges we faced,  
248 you know in terms of connectivity in terms of doing the transition. A lot of that was our  
249 immediate challenge. The challenge, as we go forward, and the CSU as a system, and CSUMB  
250 as a campus, have committed to a Fall semester that is going to be primarily virtual. And so,

251 because we believe that we're not through this COVID crisis, and that our students are better  
252 served in a virtual environment right now, so as we go forward, we're going to be looking. Some  
253 of the challenges will be what I just mentioned about making sure that we've got enough  
254 technical capacity for both students and faculty, and we're working towards that in terms of  
255 getting more machines and finding interesting ways. It's interesting, it's opened up some ways of  
256 thinking that maybe we wouldn't we wouldn't have had to go to. For example, our IT people are  
257 looking into ways that students can use a regular web connection, a regular browser connection,  
258 and access a computer and use the software that's sitting on a computer in an empty lab at  
259 CSUMB, and be able to do their work by remotely controlling that computer. We never would  
260 have thought of that. Why would we have done such a thing? I think the future is going to show  
261 us that we can utilize some of those kinds of opportunities. We can be a little bit more  
262 technologically based than we've been. I think we're headed towards a place where we're likely  
263 to be more hybrid, because our students and our faculty, and as people, we still want that  
264 connectivity. And there are some things that you can't do without being in a face-to-face  
265 environment, for example, we're not holding scuba classes this Fall. It's kind of tough to do a  
266 remote scuba session! But on the other hand, the power of the computer first of all, I think it's  
267 going to give our students an experience that will help them in the future our world is only going  
268 to go more technology. It's only going to be more and more technological, and you're going to  
269 have to use these tools, and you're going to have to get along and understand how to work in that  
270 environment. And so, this I think, is a good base experience for our students. It's a challenge for  
271 some and I know not everybody likes it, but understand it and to know that it's something that a  
272 challenge you can beat. I think will be important from an administrative standpoint this is going  
273 to give us the opportunity to expand our student population without having to expand our

274 facilities, which is really critical in the times when budgets are tight and it's difficult and a long,  
275 it's a huge long process, to build a building. So, like the building behind me, our library that's  
276 now I think they're 12 years old. And it's not easy. We've had now two more buildings built since  
277 that one built. It's not easy to build buildings. But if you have the ability to take one classroom  
278 and put two classes in it for every time period, that's next. That's an expansion. You know  
279 Monday you're doing face-to-face, Wednesday you do virtual. And I also think it's going to help  
280 transform just even how we teach, because faculty will get you know. And we're doing a  
281 Summer Institute right now, for our faculty, to help them expand their horizons, learn a little bit  
282 more about different techniques one can do. How you don't have to always be synchronous. You  
283 can do teaching asynchronously, and I think it's going to expand just our whole pedagogy just the  
284 way in which we teach, the way in which we approach students. It's going to be a bigger blend of  
285 things, and we're going to be looking to do. To have students doing more in that outside the  
286 classroom part, and coming into the classroom doing more interaction. That's just one of the  
287 ways that I think [we can] change.

288 **28:44 Gutiérrez** *Exactly. It's wonderful to think that we can come out of this strengthened*  
289 *in many ways, after going through very difficult times.*

290 **28:51 Horvath** Absolutely

291 **28:55 Gutiérrez** *Thank you thank you so much for your time. This has been a pleasure of a*  
292 *conversation and I look forward to continue our interaction in the future. Thank you so much.*

293 **28:04 Horvath** Oh, you're welcome.