

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

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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.