

Transcript of Interview with Dr. Gerald Poyo by Bianca-Rhae Jacquez

Interviewee: Dr. Gerald Poyo

Interviewer: Bianca-Rhae Jacquez

Date: 11/17/2020

Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Lily Crigler

Abstract:

Dr. Poyo talks about the process of converting his classes online. Teaching these past two semesters has changed his opinion about online classes. Through the help of St. Mary's University and the History Department, he was been to tackle the difficult job.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 00:03

Can you state your name?

Dr. Poyo 00:06

My name is Professor Gerald Poyo, and I'm a professor of Latin American and U.S. Latino history.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 00:18

Dr. Poyo, how long have you been teaching at St. Mary's, and how long have you been teaching in general?

Dr. Poyo 00:24

I've been at St. Mary's, since the fall of 1992. And before that, I taught for about a year and a half, almost two years at Florida International University in Miami. And before that, I worked as a research- a researcher and a museum curator at the Institute of Texan cultures in downtown San Antonio. And... and along the way, when I was a museum curator, I taught- I taught a course, every- every semester at San Antonio College, and either San Antonio College downtown or UTSA.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 01:22

Um, have you always taught Latin American history, or did you dabble in different fields of study?

Dr. Poyo 01:30

Well, Latin American history is the area that I specialized in. And in the early years, teaching at San Antonio College in UTSA, I taught almost exclusively U.S. history, because they didn't

teach Latin American history. And- and then, when I- at Florida International University, I taught human history, and I taught Latin American history. And then when I came to St. Mary's, I started teaching U.S. Latino history, and Mexican American history, in addition to Latin American history, and- and US history.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 02:16

I did not know that. That's why it's always like, you're just the Latin American history professor.

Dr. Poyo 02:22

Well, you have to- you have to- you get your field of specialization, but especially if you go to small universities, like St. Mary's, because the fac- because the departments are small, then you have to try to teach- you have to expand your teaching. Unlike if you go to like a major university, like UT Austin are something you teach, you teach your specialty, and that's all you teach. So it's kind of nice to be at a smaller place where you can expand your- your teaching experience.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 02:57

Yeah. I agree. So how would you describe your class structure pre-pandemic?

Dr. Poyo 03:03

Class structure? What do you mean by structure?

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 03:08

Was it very interactive in person? Have you ever done like, a lot of online courses before?

Dr. Poyo 03:17

No, I have never taught online courses. And I had promised myself that I would never teach online courses because I believe so much and being in the classroom, and be with students. And I think that there's something to be said for face to face teaching. So my- in my classroom, I do- I have- I began, in my earlier years, I spent a lot of time doing lecturing, because that's the way- that's what you did. That's the way that- that professors taught mostly was, at least history professors, was- was through lectures. And over time, I started doing less lecture and more discussion, group conversation. And now today, I don't really do much lecture anymore. I do mostly... I try to lead the classroom conversation into a particular direction and add lecture material as I go. But it's my assumption always that if the students come to class with their assignments, there's no reason to lecture, but rather- rather to take- but to rather take a deeper look at the material that the students have already read.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 04:45

Um, in March 2020, we were announced that we were going to get an extra week of spring break, to allow us to transition to online classes. How did you react to that announcement?

Dr. Poyo 05:00

Well, I reacted as we all did. It was- it wasn't a- they weren't asking us to do it, they were telling us to do it. So despite my trepidations, I decided that I would- this would be a good time to take advantage and to learn a lot of stuff about technology that I had never really taken the time to learn. My idea about- about technology was you learn it when you absolutely have to use it. And since my job was mostly teaching, and I did a lot- and then writing, researching and writing, I didn't really need a lot of- of the emerging technologies for what I- what I do. But once- once we had to go online, then everything changed. And we had to take had to take a new attitude and move forward.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 06:04

How did you feel emotionally about it? Were you scared, nervous?

Dr. Poyo 06:10

I wasn't nervous or scared. I was- I was a bit concerned as to how quickly I could- I could learn all the things that I needed to learn. But really, when things closed down in March, the only thing that I really had to learn at that point was how to how to use Zoom. And so we took the existing class that was already- already had in place. And rather than going to the classroom, I just did it on Zoom. So I thought, "Well, this is not too hard." So after fumbling- fumbling around a bit and learning how to do Zoom, then I worked through the rest of the semester. And it was- it went well. But that was just the first taste, because after the semester ended, then we were informed that we all had to be certified to teach online. University has a- the university has a certification program for any professor who wanted to teach online. And, and frankly, that was one of the things that that sort of persuaded me that not to go online, because then I'd have to spend the whole summer going through this very- was turned out to be quite a- quite a rigorous course. And I never really wanted to spend my summers doing that. I wanted to spend my summers doing research and writing. So I had never really moved in the direction. But now in that direction, but now I had no choice. We all had to be certified and we all had to be prepared to go into the fall semester.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 08:12

What changes did you make in your class? You said you had more discussion and conversational type in person classes, is that the structure you're still trying to keep now that you're online?

Dr. Poyo 08:25

Yep. Yeah, pretty much. In fact, one of the things that- well, let me jus-t let me just go back. The

main thing that changed in my course, was that online, at least through the certification program, we were required to set up the entire syllabus with the entire course already completed. That is, in my experience, I only have a syllabus, but exactly what you know, exactly each week, exactly what, for example, if I had a quiz or a test, or some other activity, I wouldn't necessarily- that wouldn't necessarily be on my syllabus that I handed out at the beginning of the semester, in terms of the actual questions, for example, that I might ask. And then the other part is that we were encouraged very strongly to learn how to do the discussion forum. And the discussion forum was really the same thing that I did in class. And I mean, that's the way I used to think about it. But actually, as I- as it turned out, the discussion forum is really an additional complement to the classroom discussion. And I found that very, very useful. So that- so that the way the class is structured now, students are assigned a reading. They come in, in this semester for example, on a Tuesday, then we talk about the readings. Students- and they have students that will gain- get a participation grade, based on the participation of that day on the readings. And the way that that is set up on- on Canvas that you can just add that grade, you know, as soon as the class is over, you can just add the grade, right? Then, during the week, Tuesday to Thursday, I have the discussion forum. And the students then have to read in the second text that we have, which is a documents test, the students have to read that documents text. And then they have to post answers to particular- particular prompts that I asked about those documents. So that by Thursday, when they come into class, then we're ready to discuss the documents and broaden the documents, right? And then on the basis of the- on the basis of the of the readings from the first text and the- and the documents in the second text, by the end of the week, then the students will write a- a week- a weekly paper in which they summarize and reflect on the theme for the week. And so what this course- with this online course made me do was to- was to structure the course much more clearly for students since- since we were in this sort of strange situation where sometimes the internet works, sometimes it didn't, it all had to be available there for them. And so I thought it- I thought it was a good- a really good learning experience for me. I learned how to do all of the- the technology stuff on Canvas, all the discussion boards and all these other things. How to video, how to record, et cetera. And- and to- and to be much more- much more reflective about what I want each student to- students to do each week. So it gave- it made me think the course ahead much more thoroughly than- than I had traditionally done in the classroom teaching. So I found that really quite enlightening, quite... And it's something, of course, that- that I'll probably continue to do whether I'm in the classroom or not.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 13:03

What issues [audio skips] ...getting everything [unintelligible] Time could be an issue, some of them not showing up at the right time. For my instance, I'm in Mountain Time Zone and San Antonio is central time. So for me, it was really hard to adjust to that time zone because my classes were reflecting a different time. So in my head, I was like, I have it at 2 but it's actually 1. Is that an issue that you saw with a lot of students this semester?

Dr. Poyo 13:39

Um, no. I didn't find that at all, I think... I can't think of a student really that was outside the time

zone. I had one student who was in Honduras, or who is in Honduras. And I don't know if the time is exactly the same there or not. But it wasn't a problem for her. She... so no, that- the time issue really was not a- was not a problem. For me, the, I guess the most disconcerting part is- was the issue of not being able to see the students' faces. It was very- it took me a long time to get used to the idea that I would just be talking to these little black boxes except for- except for a couple students or two or three, really, two students who regularly turned on their videos. And the rest of them, although I encourage them to, didn't, so I only had- I only had two students who would turn on their videos. And I don't know exactly why, but I do know that sometimes students would not really be there behind that little black box. And so I always had to be- had to be sure to be calling on everybody to be sure that they were actually there. And we got into a bit of a, with a couple students, a bit of a cat and mouse game where it wasn't clear to me that they were there, or if they were there, or they said they were away, they'd stepped away for a minute. Anyway, it was a little disconcerting to have to worry about that and to be thinking about that. The other part that was sometimes problematic is the student- the student mics often didn't work. But sometimes it got the- I got the impression that if they didn't know the answers to the questions, I asked them in class, they would say, their mics not working. And so, you know, that also was a bit problematic, sometimes trying to figure out, you know, especially if they're getting a participation grade for the classroom participation. And so how do I evaluate their participation when they're not either- either able to talk to me? Or maybe they use that as an excuse when they don't really have the answer. So those kinds of things, they're- they're not really- they're not really terrible, and they weren't really traumatic, but they were things that I had to sort of deal with, which you wouldn't have to and then in a regular classroom.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 16:44

Did you have any issues with internet or technology?

Dr. Poyo 16:48

With what?

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 16:49

Did you have any issues with internet or technology, connecting to your classes?

Dr. Poyo 16:55

I didn't have any- I had- I didn't really have any, any problems at all. I know I had students who had problems who couldn't get on or they got kicked out, or- or it was unstable. But I think all in all- all in all, it was pretty good. Not- not- there weren't that many problems.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 17:26

Um, what advantages do you see online learning having on your career and your ability to teach in the future? Now that you've had this long experience and all these years, especially since

you're certified now, how do you think that event is an advantage to your career?

Dr. Poyo 17:48

Well, I think the main effect, the main thing is that I'll be able to support the department if it decides that it needs more online courses, or, for example, the graduate program is right now during this- this year, totally online. In the future, I don't know if it will be totally online, but- but online will certainly continue to be an important piece of it. So that allows me to support the department in that sense and- and teach those courses online. So that's- I think that's a great benefit for the department. And a great benefit for me because then I can continue to teach in the graduate program. Also, it provides the possibility of expanding our undergraduate online courses. We have never- we've never had an online under- very many online courses. We, in the past taught, Dr. Van Hoy, for example, would teach some online courses in the summer, so she was the vanguard of our- of our online- of our online teaching. And she was the only one that did it some years ago. But now we can expand that, and we could teach classes during the regular year, if we need to, or want to. So I think- I think that's the main benefit for me. The other- the other benefit might be that I'm learning how- I've learned also how to do meetings- meetings online. And- and the department has been doing a lot of presentations online. And- and in the future, we'll probably be doing some webinars. And so those are- those are all things that I've learned how to do. And once- once we go back to regular time, regular things, I don't know if we'll continue to use this technology in this way, but if we need to, we certainly know how to do it.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 20:21

If you were offered right now to go back onto campus, would you go back onto campus? Do you think it's something that you view as an important part of your classroom now like, going on to campus and teaching in front of your students? Or do you think [unintelligible]

Dr. Poyo 20:44

As of right now, I had the opportunity to go back to campus, but for the spring, but I chose not to. I just turned 70. I am- I am- I'm in that- I'm in that high risk category. So it doesn't make any sense for me, I don't think, to go back into the classroom, even though there seemed to be doing a very good job. It seems to me that I would rather just wait 'till my- 'till I get my vaccine. And then- then I'd be happy to go back to the classroom. In fact, I'll insist on it.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 21:34

I think you should wait [unintelligible] Your safety comes before everyone else.

Dr. Poyo 21:42

That's what I think, too. There's no point- there's no point in getting sick if you have- if you have an alternative. And so...

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 21:52

Now, how do you feel now about online teaching? You did say you promised yourself in the past that you weren't going to online teach? How do you feel by now like, would you, let's say, want to do online teaching only now or maybe expand your online teaching to other different avenues, maybe help other universities in their online teaching?

Dr. Poyo 22:20

Well, my whole- my whole view of online teaching has- has changed dramatically, really. And- and I think, you see, when- when online teaching first developed, it was very low tech. And there was no Zooming, things like that. It was- it was just you just put your course online. And you email back and forth or chat back and forth somehow; I don't know- I don't know exactly how it was done. And it just seemed like it was a- and it was no real contact, you know, real time contact with students. So I guess I developed my attitude about online teaching from from that- from that time. And it wasn't until spring that when I actually had to do it, I saw how much the technology had advanced. Zoom, I'd heard about Zoom, but I've never used Zoom, before last March. And I was really surprised at what a wonderful tool it is and how- and how- how you can how you can engage on Zoom as easily as you can engage in the classroom. And then the discussion- the discussion board, which of course, we've always had on- on Canvas. I hadn't ever used too much because frankly, I never wanted to take the time to learn how- how to do it effectively. Anyway, I would prefer to do the- if I can do discussions in class, why would I want to do discussions online? But- but doing it- having this experience, I've learned that those two things can be very complimentary. You can do both and- and have different objectives in the classroom from from the objectives online, in the forum, right? So- so- so by getting really deeply involved in it, I could see more clearly the different options. And with the technology, the way it is, it really- it really makes it interactive and makes it so that you can- you can engage, you can- you can do a lot of things that I never know you could do. So I'm happy to continue teaching online but certainly not exclusively. I don't want to- I don't want- I don't want St Mary's to turn into a University of Phoenix. [laughs] I know that's where you- that's where you are, right?

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 25:07

No, I'm in El Paso. I'm in El Paso.

Dr. Poyo 25:09

Oh, you're in El Paso. I thought you were a Phoenix person.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 25:12

No [unintelligible]

Dr. Poyo 25:14

Oh, yes, that's right. So we don't want to turn into a school that's exclusively online, obviously. But- but for- for creating- for having- for being able to attract more students, for example, in the graduate program, we have a couple students now, who are ones in Utah. And I don't know where the other one is, but- but they're only taking those courses, they're only enrolled in our program this semester, just because they could do it online. Now, I don't know if that's the- I don't know if once the virus has gone, they'll come back- they'll come here or whether they'll want to finish the whole program online. I don't know about that. Yeah. So- so yeah. So like, I've appreciated learning all this. And I'll continue to use it as long as it's useful for me and for the department. And- but I do not want to replace my in class teaching with that, so...

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 26:20

What is one thing you would like people to understand about a professor's point of view during a pandemic since online teaching is something that a lot of people have not thought about, especially what the teachers, the educators are going through? We've mostly been focusing on the students' perspective, the administration struggles. How do you want people to understand from your perspective, what has happened, and what's going on?

Dr. Poyo 26:48

I think the probably the- the thing that people may not understand is how much extra effort and work it took to take- to transform an entire faculty in a matter of, really five months from a faculty that's primarily classroom focus and to transfer that into an entire faculty that can teach online. I think that's been a really big commitment by the faculty. And- and in the face- in the face also of the uncertainty of- of keeping jobs, a lot of faculty that- that lost their jobs, not our full time faculty, but our adjunct faculty. And in the uncertainty of what's going to happen- what happened to our benefits, our benefits have been cut. And whether we'll ever get that back or not. Who knows. And our salaries have been cut. And I think we all understand why. And I don't think anybody would- not many people oppose the idea because it had to be done. But it- but there was a lot of- a lot of stuff was going on, affecting our lives. And I think that our faculty at St. Mary's stepped up in a big way, and have done a great job. But you know, we just- just did what we had to do, and I'm not sure how many people out there in the world really know much about that. Lots of times- lots of times people say, "Oh, a university professor, he teaches- he teaches two courses a day. And then he goes home, right?" [laughs]

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 28:52

That's not the case, I know. I've seen you in office [unintelligible] ...so I know how much work you put into it.

Dr. Poyo 28:59

That's all of us. We all work hard. Just as- just as just as you all do.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 29:07

What do you think the university did well in preparing you guys for the online classes?

Dr. Poyo 29:12

What do we think that St. Mary's did well?

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 29:15

Yes. In preparing you for the online classes. What type of support did they offer you?

Dr. Poyo 29:21

Well, St. Mary's, um, turns out that St. Mary's has one heck of an Academic Technology Department. They're always- they're always there but- and you- and it's like everything else. If you have a Canvas problem, you know, you call them up and you say, "I've had this Canvas problem," or whatever it is. But this was a whole new level of demands on them. And they, I mean, they were working day in- day and into the night to- to support- first of all, to teach us all of this. And secondly, to support whatever technology problems that we had in terms of how to how to solve technology problems that we had in order to be able to be online. So I think there was a lot of investment to do additional upgrading the technologies, and I don't know exactly everything they did. But they did it. And they did it quickly. And they did it quite efficiently. So what we did, as faculty members, we couldn't have done without that- that really commitment and investment by the Academic Technology. I suppose not, I mean, for us prior, we dealt with Academic Technology, but obviously, the entire Technology Group at the university,

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 31:05

I know have talked a little bit about the new methods you've added to your course, like the discussion board, are there any other ones that you look for- you want to try out in your next semester, in the spring semester, any new technology things like, I know, for example, Dr. Wieck does flipgrids as another way of discussion board through videos. Is there different avenues you want to take that you have, I guess, shared with other professors in your- in the department?

Dr. Poyo 31:37

Um, well, I learned how to do the video- videotaping so that I can do lectures if I need to. But I never really used that because I decided not to do lectures in the classroom, in the Zoom meetings. As I mentioned, I decided that I would put a lot of pressure on the students to- and- and one of the reasons I could do this is because it was a relatively small class, 15 students, so that the students were expected to come in having read the assignment, and then the class time would be- would be direct conversation with the students, which included in and involves calling on students, and calling on all the students throughout- throughout the- throughout the class time. And so if it's a bigger class, you know, if you got 25 students or

something that's a lot harder to do. And maybe- maybe you need to lecture. But with the smaller classes, you can- you can have the conversation with the students. And if they're not getting something, then you can sort of go into a mini lecture, if you will, or a series of mini lectures during the during the course class time, to clarify to go deeper, to do things that students- to get into areas that the students asked about or didn't quite understand very well. So I found that interactive approach a lot more satisfying. I think for students, I think the students liked it more. And, and for me, it allowed- it allowed me to be more flexible. And to be able to think in real time about which- which direction I wanted to take the material. If I have a lecture already pre recorded, then it's- it's- it's not as dynamic, right? So- so I didn't really use that video, I don't know, if I will, in the future, depends on maybe the size of the classes. In the past I have already used in the past with Canvas, I've used lots of films. I didn'- I haven't used- I didn't use films this year, because- so far because I find that the canopy, the canopy site, which we use for films has been cut so badly- so badly that we hardly get any films anymore. So that the films that I'll use- I use, I can't really access them anymore because the university is cutting back because of the financial crisis. So the financial- so each film that you watch on canopy, university has to pay for each time that it's- it's- it's viewed. And so and- and I would have many, you know, now not all my classes, but many of my classes I use a lot of films. And so then what- what happens is since I can't afford them anymore, then they are cutting them back. So this semester rather than fighting to see where I could find these films, I just decided not to use them and until I can figure out how to get to them. The stuff that Dr. Wieck does is all beyond me right now. It's all way beyond what I- I know about or can do. So I'm hoping to learn more and more from her as I am already on- in the public history program, learning how to use Omeka, for example. And- and so I'm more intrigued by the technology than I was before.

Bianca-Rhae Jacquez 35:39

I think that is all my questions. [unintelligible] ...a random order.

Dr. Poyo 25:46

Okay. The History Department has worked together very well on all of this. So I think we've been lucky.