

Technology Shaping Modern Global Education

Yes, it's true that artificial intelligence can replace some of the skills learned in school, like rote memorization. But this does not concern

Stuart Sidle, Ph.D., dean of Mercy College's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SSBS), as he believes that SSBS students' career success can be attributed to what SSBS equips them to do — and what artificial intelligence can never do.

“Robots cannot learn the nuanced, inherently human skills like cross-cultural competencies — the ability to work on a globally diverse team and understand different cultures and value systems, the ability to build trust with people who are very different from you, the ability to communicate effectively with all kinds of people no matter where they are from.”

But, sometimes, building cross-cultural competencies through experiential learning, such as study abroad, may come at a cost and may not be possible for all Mercy students. SBSS is addressing these issues of equity and access in developing cross-cultural competencies by leveraging technologies to ensure that all students graduate with these essential skills for success in the workplace.

For example, Mercy's award-winning Model United Nations (MUN) team never travels farther than Washington, D.C., and yet students develop deep global knowledge and communication skills. Students work to understand global issues from the perspective of other countries' ambassadors and using technology has only strengthened their preparation over the past two years. The team now schedules regular online practice sessions on Zoom with the University of New Haven — another top-performing team — in which students



Students in the interactive theater project, taken from the perspective of the Iraqi students looking at the Mercy classroom on the screen.

practice presenting their speeches and papers to each other. The teams also use a software platform called Gatherly to simulate attending the MUN conference, which enables students to choose which delegates to meet and ally with — just like the decisions they will make at the live conference in April.

“This kind of practice gives students a lot of confidence once they get to the conference and a support network to lean on if other delegates negotiate aggressively,” said Michiko Kuroda, senior instructor in the International Relations and Diplomacy Program and visiting fellow at Mercy's Center for Global Engagement, who teaches the two-semester MUN course.

SSBS makes global perspectives accessible to students by inviting experts from across the world to speak on various globally focused topics. After the 2020 presidential election, SSBS — in partnership with

the Center for Global Engagement and the Guarini Institute for Public Affairs at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy — planned and facilitated a forum titled “U.S. Election 2020: Highest Turnout vs Deepest Divide.” After remarks by the featured presenter, Federigo Argentieri, Ph.D., director of the Guarini Institute, who laid a framework for discussing the global implications of the 2020 U.S. election, Mercy students and other participants analyzed and made sense of the eventful election.

“The key thing that students get from events like these is exposure,” said Eduardo Albrecht, Ph.D., associate professor in the International Relations and Diplomacy Program. “At Mercy, we believe in learning by doing. Real learning occurs in experiencing something, even if that's listening to and interacting with a speaker virtually.”

Students can also develop

cross-cultural competencies in the classroom. As one example, Assistant Professor, Mental Health Counseling Carolyn Cullen, Ph.D., partnered with Esther Mulnix, Ph.D. — a former Mercy faculty member who is now a professor at the American University of Iraq in Baghdad — in the fall 2021 semester to conduct an interactive theater project with undergraduate psychology students at both institutions.

To begin, the Iraqi students performed a short skit via Zoom that they had written about a real-life scenario involving faculty-student

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interactions — the focus of their interactive theater project. In the five-minute scene, a female hijab-wearing student went to speak with her male professor after class about a low quiz grade, but he dismissed her and suggested that college-level courses might be too difficult for her. After the skit, the American and Iraqi students asked questions of both actors who remained in character, such as, “Why didn’t you stand up for yourself with the professor?” and “What made you think it was okay to treat the student like that?” The subsequent discussion helped students examine situations from multiple perspectives and devise new ideas about how to foster strong student-faculty relationships. The mix of Iraqi and American voices in the conversation added complexity and nuance to the conversation as students considered gender, cultural identity and deference to authority in both societies.

In addition, SSBS students may soon be able to gain international work experience without the need for travel. Sidle is exploring setting up

virtual internships in which students would work for an international company based in a country like Colombia without leaving Mercy’s campus. In these internships, students would gain practical work experience and practice their Spanish while developing cross-cultural competencies by working with people from another country.

Thanks to SSBS’s creative initiatives, students — no matter their ability to travel extensively or study abroad — will be fully prepared to take on the world after graduation.

Mercy is even helping other institutions expand equity and access to global learning. Several SSBS faculty members — including Sidle, Kuroda, Albrecht and Cullen — are presenting these initiatives at the annual Conference on Global Learning organized by American Association of Colleges and Universities. In this way, Mercy will impact students across the country by inspiring educators at other institutions to find their own ways to leverage technology to bring global learning to all students.

