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SHU's Robert McCloud Teaches Class of 2 Million Children: Computer-Aided Learning in Albania

Robert McCloud, Sacred Heart University

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At the center of the Albanian national flag is a bold silhouette of a two-headed eagle. It seems an apt image for this still remote country and culture. Perhaps one eye is looking to its troubled and very troubling past with its brief flickers of independence. And the other eye may be directed toward a future that is growing brighter every day as this NATO ally considers possible membership in the European Union. It is this Albania that draws Sacred Heart University Professor Robert C. McCloud.

Twice a Fulbright Scholar in the region – the University’s first – he is continuing his productive and very happy relationship with the people of the Balkans. This past summer, he spent a month in Tirana, Albania’s capital, where he is a consultant to the Education Excellence and Equity Project (EEE-P) of the Ministry of Education and Sciences. In a nutshell, that means he is an advisor to all the country’s K-12 educators on issues related to computer-based learning. His recommendations will touch the lives of some two million children in what is hoped will bring Albania to a leadership position in technology education and use.

An associate professor of Computer Science and Information Technology at Sacred Heart, Bob McCloud had already spent 17 months in the Balkans – a place for which he has developed an obvious fondness. He credits the ready cooperation of Professor Domenick Pinto, who chairs the University’s CSIT Department. Without his “considerable assistance,” he asserts, “this would have been impossible to manage.” Dr. McCloud returned in October for two weeks to complete his report to the Ministry and launch the ambitious four-year plan that will reshape the integration of technology in pre-university education.

Funded by the U.S. Department of State, the Fulbright program is limited to some 800 participants annually. Dr. McCloud spent a full academic year, from September 2007 to June 2008, at the American University in Kosovo (AUK), where he lectured and advised the university on “Building an Information Technology Concentration.” He has conducted research on internet privacy, published through Kadir Has University in Istanbul, and on bootleg electronic files, published by Epoka University in Tirana, Albania. In addition, he delivered the
annual guest lecture series at Shkodra University in Shkodra, Albania, this past spring. His topic was using information technology to promote tourism.

During his recent service, Professor McCloud met with educators from across the country, some of whom drove for hours to attend these seminars. “They are hungry for information,” he reflects. “We discussed what was working, and what was lacking in the classrooms. Two things, especially, convince me that these programs will succeed. First, the most important ‘social capital’ in this society is the family: they want their children to thrive. And, second, dating back forever, is their deep commitment to education. These make a winning combination that is hard to beat.”

Albania, once the most closed society in Europe, is opening up to the West, and computer literacy will be a key tool in ensuring future success. A country slighter smaller than Maryland, it has a population roughly the size of Connecticut’s. While its economy is at the bottom of Europe’s standards, it is growing at one of the fastest clips on the continent. Again, this is where information technology will be critical.

The policies Dr. McCloud has championed will take years to roll out – and a continuing infusion of energy and cash. In a developing country, many things have to take place simultaneously. So he has worked with present IT teachers to equip them to lead future developments. A grant will put a laptop computer in the hand of every qualified teacher, but to succeed with their students, the young people will have to have access to the right hardware. And software. And bandwidth. And the right kind of bandwidth. The list goes on and on.

Every school is presently equipped with at least one computer lab, but they are such a valued resource that they are kept under lock and key much of the time. So, extending computer lab hours, even making these places social centers that will attract more users, will be of great importance. The goal is to begin high tech education at the third grade so that children will grow in these strengths all their lives. But as in the case here, young children must be taught to use these devices responsibly and discreetly. The opportunities and the perils of the worldwide web are the same all over the world.

An honors graduate of Williams College, Dr. McCloud studied in England, France and Germany, and he feels right at home as an ambassador for both sides. “People all over Albania now know the name of Sacred Heart University, that’s for sure. A largely Muslim country, people want to know, what’s a ‘Sacred Heart’?”

He recalls numerous instances of gracious hospitality and warmth in a country famous until recently for its government-induced fear of strangers. “I got into a cab and was driven directly to the German Embassy,” he remembers, “which the driver had misunderstood as my destination – due to my heavily accented Albanian. When I apologized that this was not what I had intended, the driver commented warmly, ‘You are trying to speak my language.’ With that, he turned off the meter – to be sure I knew I was not being double-charged – and drove me right where I wanted to go! They are wonderful people.”

Every meeting with educators and others concerned about the “digital divide” in this developing
country yielded new contacts, email addresses and phone numbers – and each of these participants would reach out to others in their schools and home towns. Thus the circle of familiarity and trust continues to grow. By creating a virtual family of colleagues and advisors and maintaining robust contact through the internet among other settings, Bob McCloud is proving beyond doubt the lasting value of the systems he has come to promote. This is not “distance learning” but communications in a small, small world.