

# Grand Tour: A contemporary take on a traditional custom

Kent State students employ emerging technologies to share the history of Florence and Kent State's presence in the city for the past 50 years.

BY MELANIE SECRE

Florence, Italy, has a long, rich history since its founding as a Roman military colony in the first century BCE. Kent State University has its own history with the city, although much briefer at 50 years. However, today's Kent State students have a unique opportunity to learn and engage with both histories through a course in emerging media at the Kent State University Florence Center.

Educational Technology is co-taught by Rick Ferdig, PhD, the Summit Professor of Learning Technologies within Kent State's Research Center for Educational Technology and professor of educational technology in the School of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies. He and co-instructor Enrico Gandolfi, PhD, assistant professor of educational technology in TLCS, are helping undergraduate and graduate students explore innovative ways to use technologies like games, simulations, social media and extended

realities to facilitate learning and teaching. Although they teach the same course at the Kent Campus, their students studying in Florence apply the course's concepts from a global perspective.

## AN AUGMENTED AND VIRTUAL TOUR OF FLORENCE

"To allow students in Florence to put in practice what they are learning, we are working with them to build a map-based tour of the city that can be seen virtually (from afar) or through augmented reality (if you are in Florence)," Ferdig says. "We're having our students explore the city and collect 360 and standard 2D images, along with audio descriptions from faculty, staff, other students and native Florentines. They have to learn about the city, the history, the art, the passion that Florentines have—and then embed that into the project."

**Above:** Two students in the Educational Technology course take a 360 photo of a building in Florence, while co-instructors Rick Ferdig, PhD, (in the black top) and Enrico Gandolfi, PhD, look on. Photo by Bob Christy, BA '95, MA '22

So in addition to learning about technology, students in the Florence course visit what Ferdig refers to as "hotspots" within the city. They learn the history of the locations, as well as that of the people who have lived, worked and made memories there.

"Part of this project is to give current and future students an opportunity to see Florence before they get there," Ferdig says. "Kent State has been in Florence for 50 years, so when we visit Palazzo Vecchio, Palazzo Vettori or Ponte Vecchio, and you hear people talk about each location, it's not just why that location is important to the history of the city—it's why that location is important to Kent State, as well."

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Wonderful stories emerge throughout the project. Students discover aspects of Florence that remind them of home and others that contrast with their lives in the United States. They also gain experiences and memories of their own that stick with them for years to come.

"The tour was created using software we developed at Kent State called GLARE, through a grant funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities," Gandolfi says. "While the Florence tour is still a work in progress, anyone can freely access the students' work. We plan on going back in 2023 with students and to continue building the tour. We will add new tours like student life, religion in Florence and museum information."

## PREPARATION FOR GLOBAL CAREERS

While the coursework is designed to prepare students for their professions, the connections made during their study abroad experience prepare them for careers in a global marketplace. "Our educational technology students, whether they're undergraduate, graduate or doctorate level, are going into fields where technology is a global industry," Ferdig says. "They will be expected not only to understand what happens in other countries, but also to work with people from other countries. We can simulate some of that experience in Kent, but it's not the same as actually bringing students to Florence and saying, 'Come explore this.'"



As a professor of educational technology with a doctorate in educational psychology, Ferdig has spent much of his career studying and understanding how people learn, grow and develop. According to educational psychology, people grow through experiences that challenge them. Education abroad challenges students in many aspects: acclimating to a new city and country, overcoming language barriers, navigating cultural differences and more. While the students face challenges and grow, Ferdig says Kent State Florence's faculty and staff are there when they need support.

By taking the Educational Technology class in Florence, Kent State students earn much more than course credits. They help preserve the stories of the city and its people, they build important relationships and they help advance the half-century partnership between Kent State University and the city of Florence. And they become globally minded citizens who will push boundaries to create a brighter future for all. ⚡

Learn more about the educational technology program at [www.kent.edu/ehhs/tlcs/etec](http://www.kent.edu/ehhs/tlcs/etec).

Learn more about the Research Center for Educational Technology at [www.kent.edu/rdet](http://www.kent.edu/rdet).

**Above:** A student in the course shows off the map-based tour app on a street in Florence. Courtesy Rick Ferdig

Scan the QR code to view the Kent State Florence Augmented and Virtual Reality Tour. Or go to <https://florence.cs.kent.edu>

