

Expanding Disability Awareness in Undergraduate Education Through an Online Course (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

This paper describes an online undergraduate course that explores ways the arts can help students develop a clearer understanding of how perceptions about (dis)ability affect their lives, and the lives of others. The course engages a variety of questions through web-mediated and arts-based activities, including: What is disability? How does schooling affect our understanding of ourselves and others? After analysis of course material, findings suggest that course outcomes, including measures of work quality and course evaluations, were both intellectually substantive and personally meaningful in both delivery modes. Student comments also suggest that many experienced the online format as a “safe space” in which to explore disability more critically. The data show that the online instructional format of the course has allowed for a dramatic expansion of the number of students who are exposed to perspectives about (dis)ability, education, and the arts, which they often characterize as transformative.

Keywords: disability, higher education, art pedagogy, online education

(dis)Ability is a concept saturated with stereotype, contention, and paradox. In fact, the cultural meanings assigned to variation in human characteristics such as mobility, intelligence or creativity may be viewed as a rich example of what Foucault (1982) has termed “dividing practices”—social and institutional processes of categorization and subjugation that operate through both external and internal (self-directed) processes. In response to these issues, an undergraduate course inquiring about the nature of (dis)ability and the related processes of disablement that operate in U.S. culture was developed. Using the arts as both an intellectual and aesthetic resource, the goal of the course has been to expand students’ understanding of (dis)ability as a social construct, and to increase their awareness of the ways the processes of disablement are mediated by the policies and practices of social institutions—particularly the schools.

Policy, research, and practice in higher education has addressed issues of disability and disablement in higher education in terms of legally required accommodations (Hadley, 2007; Konur, 2006), faculty attitudes towards those accommodations (Rao, 2004), and universal design for instruction (Burgstahler,

2013; Silver, Bourke, & Strehorn, 2006). While often the result of hard-won legislative action that ensures students’ rights, access, and equitable participation in higher education, this way of seeing disability is still narrowly focused on disability as primarily an individual problem that exists inside of particular bodies and minds and that must be accommodated via legal, policy, and curricular measures). Meanwhile, there has been an expanded attention and commitment to issues of diversity in higher education (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). While this commitment to diversity has been critiqued as intentionally oblique, and not actually addressing the root causes of issues like racial divides on campus (Iverson, 2007), disability issues continue to be relegated to legal services and academic support offices rather than mentioned in discussion alongside other aspects of student identity, however complex.

Depiction of the Problem

In this paper, the value and importance of expanding our view of disability is explored, and the processes of disablement are understood as cultural-

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ly-constructed experiences (Barnes & Mercer, 2001) in which we all participate in one way or another. A practical and important part of this conversation in higher education concerns how issues of disability and ableism might be included in discussions of diversity for students who have not encountered or been exposed to these issues before in their educational careers. In part because of the lack of widespread awareness (outside of the disability community) of disability as a unique identity marker, there is a lack of curriculum that helps undergraduate students understand disability issues on anything other than a medical or rehabilitative level. Thus, if undergraduate students do encounter disability they are taught that it is a problem to be solved, rather than a social group to be understood and allied with. This is the central problem of our paper and of the course: how can disability be moved from an “issue” to be addressed by teaching practices and accommodations, toward understanding the construct of disability as a source of learning about our culture and ourselves?

In order to engage these issues in a critical way, pedagogical strategies for the course have been guided in large part by John Dewey’s ([1934], 2005) insights about the unique nature and functions of “art as experience.”

The poetic as distinct from the prosaic, esthetic art as distinct from scientific, expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one. (p. 88)

Dewey’s insights about the unique and constitutive function of aesthetic experience were used as a guiding principle in designing curriculum which induces students to “have an experience” with (dis)ability, art and art-making. This was a significant pedagogical choice and practice for this course because of the specific kinds of “experiences” students needed to undertake in order to begin to question their deeply held, and culturally guided, ideas about disability. Ware (2002) terms this process “reviving consciousness” and notes that, in her work specifically with teachers who are given the opportunity to question their own assumptions of disability, they experience “a recovery of the self and of consciousness relative to understanding disability in schools and society as both a constituency and a concept” (p. 156). In the context of the course, this “reviving consciousness” relative to disability, education, and art includes drawing on the expressions of artists themselves (particularly artists with physical, social, or cognitive impairments) as powerful resources for expanding our students’ awareness of the many faces of disability as personal experience (Ware, 2002). This also in-

volves asking students to explore and reflect on their own experiences with the arts, focusing in particular on how people come to make statements like “I am not an artist” or “I can’t dance (draw, sing, write)”. This aspect of the course is developed through asking students to engage in a variety of art-making activities—including dance, visual art, poetry, and other modes of creative expression. Students almost always express some degree (and often an acute degree) of anxiety and discomfort about these assignments. This anxiety provides a very personal context in which students begin to critically explore the cultural and historical sources of their views of themselves as “non-artists” (Sarason, 1990). These almost invariably have to do with their experiences in school and with the same social forces that separate those who “can” from those who “can’t.”

Using these experiences and the questions that arise from them as context, the last third of the course takes up questions about schooling and education. One of the goals for this part of the course is to help students make connections between the overt processes of devaluation and disablement that routinely function to marginalize and oppress people with physical, sensory or cognitive impairments, and the cultural ideologies and institutional practices of ableism that have shaped students’ own educational experiences, and their understanding of themselves (Derby, 2016). Students consider both the kinds of disabling practices that they remember so very well from their own school experiences, as well as contrasting examples of educational programs and practices which promote and support creative inquiry and expression as a valued dimension of learning (e.g., Gallas, 1994; Paley, 1995; Robinson, 2001).

This paper describes the (dis)Ability, Education and the Arts (DEA) course, and evaluates its outcomes to date. There are three research questions to orient analysis of course outcomes. First: “*What* are students learning?,” including the extent to which students’ expanded their prior understandings of (dis)ability as a social construct, and the extent to which they began to identify the pervasive impacts of cultural and institutional ableism/normativity in their own educational experiences and in their lives. A second general research question was “*How* are students learning?” This research question relates to Dewey’s ideas about the unique functions of art as experience, and the ways in which use of the arts as pedagogical resources impacted students. Finally, student ratings and comments from face-to-face (f2f) and asynchronous online course delivery modes are compared, including comments on the differences and similarities related to these models of course delivery.

Participant Demographics

The DEA course was offered at a large research-intensive university located in the western United States. At this institution undergraduate students in all departments and in all major courses of study were required to complete one course in “diversity” and one course in “visual, literary, and performing arts” as part of the university’s general education requirements. The DEA course allowed students to complete either or both of these requirements. In addition, DEA was offered for elective credit within the University undergraduate major in Early Childhood and Family Studies. The ability to complete multiple general education requirements, and the flexibility of the course’s online context, may have made this course a popular choice over others offered in the same quarter. It is now the most highly enrolled course in the College of Education at this university, despite there being no advertising or additional recruitment for the course. To support the course and its development, there is a teaching team including one faculty member in the College of Education, three doctoral students in education, and an “Artist in Residence” who has in the past been an MFA student recruited from networks in the Dance department and who contributes to the art pedagogy of the course. Depending on enrollment, the course is taught by the faculty member or a graduate student, with up to three additional graders (including the Artist in Residence) serving as support.

Outcomes for 294 undergraduate students enrolled in DEA over three quarters were evaluated for this study. Enrollments each quarter varied considerably, with a substantial increase in student enrollment over time. The face-to-face version of the course (Spring 2015) enrolled 49 students, while the online course enrolled an average of 125 students per quarter. About one third of the students enrolled were from the university’s College of Education; the remaining two thirds of students came from academic departments across campus representing a wide variety of disciplines in the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and professional schools. Students also represent all years and stages of their undergraduate careers, from first year to seniors.

Description of Practice

Disability, Education and the Arts is structured as a one quarter course taught in 10 individual “modules”. It begins with disability and social model-focused modules and progresses into exploring more theoretical and experiential relationships between disability, education, and art. Some themes of the

modules include: the social and medical construction of disability; the social process of disablement; art, disability, and social change; and (re)visioning education: (un)learning disability. Students are required to progress through each of the 10 modules consecutively in order to complete the course, though they can complete individual tasks (readings, watching media) at any point within the timeline for each module. The course culminates in a final project that asks students to represent their learning over the course of the quarter through a “learning exhibit” of student-produced art and related commentary.

While each module has its own theme and focus, readings and media, the course utilizes a specific learning process to unify each module and structure the course more generally. The learning process has four consecutive but interrelated parts, which we have termed “Encounter,” “Explore,” “Interact,” and “Reflect.” Figure 1 depicts the learning process model.

Encounter activities are those that are traditionally thought of as “professor assigned” materials- course readings, documentaries, other media/videos, or mini (approximately 15 minute) videotaped lectures. Encounter activities provide a comment “text” for the course, and often ask students to engage in active reflection on their own thinking, previous assumptions, or biases in the context of a particular Encounter activity they share. Encounters push students to explore the connections between disability, education, and art with guidance and scaffolding, but students are also encouraged and accountable for connecting these Encounter experiences to their personal history in school, their feelings around disablement and disability, and/or their history of engagement with the arts and art-making. A wide range of disabilities were represented in the Encounter readings and media, including physical, intellectual, and learning disabilities. Students are then asked to extend the Encounter experiences assigned to them through “Exploration” of activities and resources they elect. Explorations in the course served an important function, both in broadening students’ thinking and making connections between ideas they engaged during Encounter activities and in affording students some choices within the learning process for each module. Explore options included attending arts- and disability-related events on campus or in the community, such as lectures or art exhibits and performances. Students were also encouraged to volunteer with local organizations that offered art, dance, or poetry classes to youth and adults with and without disabilities. If community or in-person experiences were challenging for students to attend, students were also able to undertake Explore experiences online, through taped poetry slams,

TED Talks, documentaries, art making tutorials, and resources focusing on particular artists with disabilities. Again, as in the Encounter materials, effort was made to vary the disability experiences students could learn from and to expand ideas about disability from purely physical or visible into a wide spectrum of lived experience.

Students were given opportunities through the Interact portion of the learning process to share their thoughts and experiences related to the module and learn from each other. In small online discussion groups, students shared art projects, discussed readings and related media, and commented on art, poetry, or other aesthetic responses shared by their peers.

Finally, after encountering new ideas, exploring outside resources, and interacting with others about their ideas, students completed each module with a reflective process we called the Documentation of Weekly Learning (DWL). The DWL had four parts. These included analysis and commentary on each Encounter activity (often using excerpts or analysis of a particular reading or media experience), a description of the individual student's chosen Exploration activities, and a commentary on what they had learned through participation in the Interact discussion board. In the last section of the DWL, students were asked to make connections between their Encounter, Explore, and Interact experiences, and summarize their learning for the week. This reflective exercise was designed to prompt students to notice shifts in their own thinking both within each of the ten modules, and over the length of the course.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

This analysis utilizes what Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) have termed a "convergent mixed methods" approach to evaluate course outcome evidence related to our research questions. This mixed method approach afforded an opportunity to compare course outcomes for f2f and online delivery systems using a common (quantitative) survey measure, while also affording the opportunity for discovering thematic patterns in student experiences and outcomes through analysis of several qualitative data sources.

Several sources of quantitative and qualitative data were used to evaluate course processes and outcomes:

- End of course evaluation surveys. A standard university course evaluation questionnaire was used to measure general student perceptions about the value and effectiveness of both the content and pedagogy of the course. This

measure included a variety of Likert-scaled items, as well as a set of open-ended questions that solicited student comments about the course.

- DWL submissions. Each week students were required to submit a "Documentation of Weekly Learning" narrative, in which they were asked to describe and evaluate what they had learned that week through Encounter, Explore, and Interact phases of the weekly learning cycle. DWL responses ranged considerably in length--the average response was 2-3 pages.
- Discussion posts. Student contributions to weekly online group discussions were reviewed, and excerpts relevant to the research questions were identified and included in the analysis.
- Final Projects. Students completed a final "Learning Exhibit" consisting of a set of five images with accompanying commentary describing how each image related to something they had learned in the course about of (dis)ability, education, and the arts.

The qualitative data analysis process involved selecting 5 student "cases" at random for in-depth analysis. Each case involved compiling available narrative data, along with artifacts from student creative work completed during the course. Then, each case's data was read, using low inference codes to identify text and artifacts that appeared to be relevant to the research questions about student learning. A thematic analysis of coded data segments was completed for each case independently. Emerging themes about what and how students learned were compared across cases, and a set of cross-case themes were identified for further comparative analysis. Using these cross-case themes, the primary data set was reexamined and compiled into a table summarizing data related to each theme for each of the five student cases. The results of this cross case thematic analysis are presented later in the paper.

The qualitative data analysis included the post-course evaluation surveys, involving Likert-scaled scores for each of five key questions appearing on the student course evaluation surveys to compare outcomes for each quarter in which the course was offered. The questions asked students to evaluate the course in terms of overall course quality and quality of the content, using a five-point Likert scale. The intellectual challenge, effort required, and level of engagement students experienced in the course were evaluated using a seven-point scale. An analysis

of what and how students learned produced several themes, described below.

What Did Students Learn?

Themes related to what students learned were titled Expanded Views of Disability, Expanded Views of Education, Expanded Views of Self, and Expanded Views of Art and Art-Making.

Expanded views of disability. Perhaps the most robust theme found in students writing about their experiences in the course had to do with their expanded views of “disability”. One student expressed the change in her views this way:

I learned some of the ways of how our understanding of disability is defined and shaped. At first, before I started taking this course, I think I had built some assumptions and stereotypes of defining disability. However, learning more about the ways of how it's constructed and created allowed me to change my view completely.

Another student expressed this kind of expanded view in a final project artwork he entitled “Multi-Faceted Man” (Figure 2). Accompanying the image, the student described his learning:

The diverse and contradictory experiences of Multi-Faceted Man mirror my experiences this quarter where I saw artistic representations of disability that ran the gamut of human experience: struggle, and pain, and suffering; hardship and handicap; loneliness and isolation; anger, sadness, and grief. But also joy, and laughter, and happiness; freedom, and adventure, and triumph; hope, intimacy, and love. This has changed my understanding of the very definition of disability.”

Expanded views of education. Another way in which students described changes in their thinking and learning over the course was through their expanded views of education, both as a system and through reflecting on their own schooling experiences. Often, students drew connections between art as pedagogy and ways that the education system should, in their minds, be better supportive of creative expression:

After reading [Eisner's] personal essays, I realized art is more deeply involved in education than I initially thought, and it is required for the education system to engage in developing a curriculum that truly values artistic activity as one of the major subjects. If education system values these vital as-

pects of art, students will have a more supportive environment to engage in artistic activities.

Other students reflected on their own experiences with art and education:

In this class I learned about the “factory model of education,” and I remembered an art class that I took in high school. The end product of the class resembled that of a factory assembly line. A row of 30 papier-mâché masks.

A few students engaged education issues with both disability and art in mind:

When I think of this in terms of “ability” or “disability” – I can't help but wonder how many children on that continuum have never been properly supported in finding and pursuing their own passions and capabilities.

Expanded views of self. One of the ways that students shifted their thinking and learning over the course was through the way they saw themselves. Many students expanded views of themselves through doing art assignments throughout the course modules, including recording a dance video and creating a self-portrait with their non-dominant hand. This often resulted in reflections from students that challenged some of the existing rules and ways they had seen people doing art:

In the end I learned that I can find my own way to make art, rather than doing it “by the book.” I initially envisioned doing the assignment by myself. But I realized, “You know what? That's not me.” And I got a lot more value out doing expressing myself the way I wanted. Not the way that I thought society or whoever wanted me to.

Some students compared their ideas about themselves when they were younger to their current ideas about who they are as undergraduates:

I also thought to myself, if I was given the opportunity when I was young, I think I would be able to be more creative and be less afraid of portraying my own expressions and creativity. When I think about myself right now, I think I fear being different and making mistake. However, I have come to realize that making mistakes and encountering new experiences are also a way to personal growth.

One student noticed shifts between the way he introduced himself to peers at the beginning of the quarter, to how he engaged a dance assignment towards the end of the quarter:

In my introductory video, I did not directly take a video of myself but edited several photos. However, by uploading dancing video to share with my group members and to post my opinions on the discussion board where all of the students who take this course can read my thoughts, my identity expanded, and I became more confident expressing my thoughts to others.

Expanded views of art and art-making. Many student comments reported an expanded understanding of function and value of art in their own lives. Others discovered broader interpretations aligned with Dewey's notion of art as experience:

From watching the ritual dance video it is more clear to me that art is not just a physical thing that you see sitting behind a pane of glass in a museum or in some funky studio used for an art show. Art can be about the experience one is having while creating art; it can be about the experience itself, and how it is displayed.

This expanded understanding of art and art-making was both a personal realization as well as a way of thinking about schools and schooling. By reflecting on their experiences with art, many students also were able to reinterpret places and spaces in their schooling lives where they felt empowered or disempowered in their creativity as students, including experiences which had lasting impacts about the way they saw themselves as undergraduate students as well.

How Did Students Learn?

The themes related to how students learned were conceptualized as First Person Narratives, Art Experiences, Taking Risks, and Using Readings as Tools.

First person narratives. Most of the students who take the course do not have a foundational knowledge or awareness of disability issues. Often, students in the course have no friends or family members with disabilities, and the course is the first time that students hear people with disabilities discussing their identities and experiences. First person narratives, then, became extremely important learning tools for students towards thinking specifically about disability in new ways:

Another video I watched was the interview with

[interview participant]. It made me think about the true definition of what a disability is. When she mentioned that she was disabled, I was having a hard time believing her. I have a preconceived definition that being disabled means you are in a wheelchair or you have a type of learning impairment, but as she stated, everyone has their own take on defining disabilities. I choose this excerpt because of her view on how disability is a political category. She says how a lot of different groups have certain interests in defining disability.

Other students recognized the difference in the learning they experienced from textbooks and first-person narratives:

First of all, after watching the documentary, I was so thankful that the first opportunity of meeting these people is within this documentary, not in any textbook or media resources.

Taking risks. Because of the requirements of the course often asked students to post their ideas, critiques, and art creations publicly for others to see, a degree of risk-taking was fundamental to the course itself. Many students noted that these experiences were important to their learning, both about themselves and with regard to the themes of the course:

I am my own harshest [critic]. It was enlightening to see that other people had very similar experiences to my own that informed them that they can't do something. It made me feel like I don't need to be so critical of my own ability. And it made me more mindful of being critical about other people's ability. My motivation for making this image was to take a risk. I am not visually artistic. I "can't draw." I am 30 years old, and I haven't attempted something so artistic since elementary school when I first learned that some kids were artistic - and other kids weren't. So I decided to cap my learning exhibit by confronting my ability or lack thereof. And I am quite pleased with the result.

Using readings as tools. While most courses require some reading or textual analysis of foundational ideas, this course encouraged students to link different parts of the learning process to the ideas of the readings to aid in learning and reflection. This process of using readings as tools to inform other learning materials in the course became important for many students, who made connections between what they read and their main takeaways from each mod-

ule. Often, these connections were personal:

From the reading “Worldview, Intelligence, and Psychological Tests,” I learned a new way of defining intelligence. I came to understand that intelligence is something that can’t be defined by only the results, but through the process. Before reading this article, I thought of intelligence as knowing more information, having more knowledge and skills, however, I was wrong. As I think about my own experience, I think I thought about myself as not being intelligent when I immigrated to the U.S. and had to learn the new language and culture. Especially at the school, I felt leftbehind and thought I wasn’t learning as fast as others.

Some readings helped students recontextualize their ideas about art and art making:

After reading this chapter, I found out that artistic activity is not only drawing the object on the paper or canvas. I realized that the word “art” or “creativity” includes broader meaning than I initially thought. I also wanted to appreciate diverse forms of art that I can easily find in my daily life.

Other readings made students question their previously held knowledge about disability:

The very fact that the topic of the reading from this author was hard to describe and irritating to me, made me think more critically of myself. If I am so quick to get irritated over a very lengthy description of a feeling until I have to explain it myself, does that too, mean that I am part of the problem of quick judgments and misunderstanding of those who are “different?” Yes. This was a hard view for me to wrap my mind around because of my background with Autism.

Art experiences. Students identified art experiences, either those required as an Encounter in a module or those personally chosen as an Explore activity, to be important for their learning both about the themes of the course and with regard to their own identity and self-concept. They noted a shift in their appreciation for art and a sense of their own development as artists, especially those who started the course believing they were not capable of artistic activity. One student noted: “I cannot say I am a dancer yet, but I am starting to become an artist who enjoys the value of dance movement and tries to stretch out more from my comfort zones like my group members.” Other students, through experimenting with

art making, refined their sense of what “perfect” art meant:

Knowing that art doesn’t necessarily have to be perfect encouraged me to do some work of my own. I am the type of person that will refrain from doing something if I know it won’t turn out how I like it. I was so impressed with the imprinting encounter, that I explored it further, and was amazed at the results. I never thought to do art that way. It expanded my notion of what artists can create and do.

Other students reflected on the universality of art and art making as a part of who we are as people, regardless of impairments, disabilities, or social messages about “good art”:

Will other people see what I saw in my mind, when I click the button to capture this moment? But I decided to just go with it and collect these images as an ode to the simple and accessible beauty that surrounded us. And I became intensely aware that I really do believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And I really do believe that artistic behavior or making special is universal and is something all people can and do share in.

Course Delivery Mode

Course evaluations were used to compare the first quarter of the course, which was taught in person, with outcomes for two subsequent quarters of the course taught in a completely online format. Two of the evaluation questions included in the comparison were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with five as the highest rating representing “Excellent.” Findings for these questions are presented in Figure 3. Results of these quantitative course evaluations showed high ratings for the course overall as delivered in both online and f2f modes. Students also reported high levels of intellectual challenge, effort, and involvement with the course relative to other courses they had taken. In general, the end of the course evaluation data suggests that students had a positive and challenging learning experience in the course, and that this experience was not substantively different across online or face-to-face formats.

Implications and Portability

The students in this study provided rich description and accompanying reflections on their learning in the course, and on the specific experiences they had with (dis)ability, art, and art-making. Student

learning over the course was summarized in four major themes: expanded views of disability, expanded views of education, expanded views of self, and expanded views of art and art making. Students identified shifts in their thinking and learning across these themes to be due to a variety of pedagogical strategies, including first person narratives, art experiences, taking risks and using readings as tools. Course evaluation data were collected for both online and face-to-face formats, allowing comparison of overall student satisfaction and engagement with the course. Findings from these course evaluation data suggest that in both formats, students had very positive experiences in the course and were highly engaged; in fact, students rated the course either as positively or more positively in its online format as they did the face-to-face version.

Interestingly, students in the initial (face-to-face) iteration of this course almost unanimously suggested keeping the course as is instead of moving it online. Despite the presumptions of the first “cohort” of students, the data suggest that students in subsequent online versions of the course also had as powerful, if not more powerful, learning experiences as when the course was taught face-to-face. This is important to consider in the context of the course goals, theoretical framework, and overall positioning in a larger context of diversity courses and education. In an online format, students can be asked to be conscious and reflective of the ways that their ideas are changing, and are given the space to do this reflection built into the course. Students can also be honest, both with themselves, their peers, and their instructors, about the knowledge that they have around disability issues.

For many students, disability was a new and somewhat taboo topic: most students’ only relationship to disability was through the elementary school classmate who came in for inclusive gym class, or maybe a relative whose limitations their family seldom discussed openly. In the context of the course, these experiences (or lack of experience) were reframed as opportunities for the students to think critically about their experiences and perceptions about disability. Why is it, for example, that most students without disabilities had little to no relationship with people with disabilities or interaction with them in their daily lives? Why were their only associations with disability centered on separation or of difference? What do these course experiences help them see about how disability is constructed, in schools and in society more generally, as a “dividing practice?” Asking students to consider these issues, to be honest about their prior beliefs and perceptions, and to be open to shifts in their learning during the course

actually appeared in many cases to be facilitated by the online format, where they often commented on experiencing a measure of safety and security through anonymity that helped them undergo shifts in their internal thinking, attitudes, and beliefs.

Experiences with the arts offered a valuable and energizing resource for the learning process, and appeared to offer a personal perspective on the lived experience of people with disabilities in ways that changed students’ views of disability as a construct. For students who come into the course with little awareness or knowledge of disability issues (as was the case for the vast majority of the students who enrolled), using the arts as a tool for learning and critical thinking proved powerful and, according to comments from many students, quite transformative.

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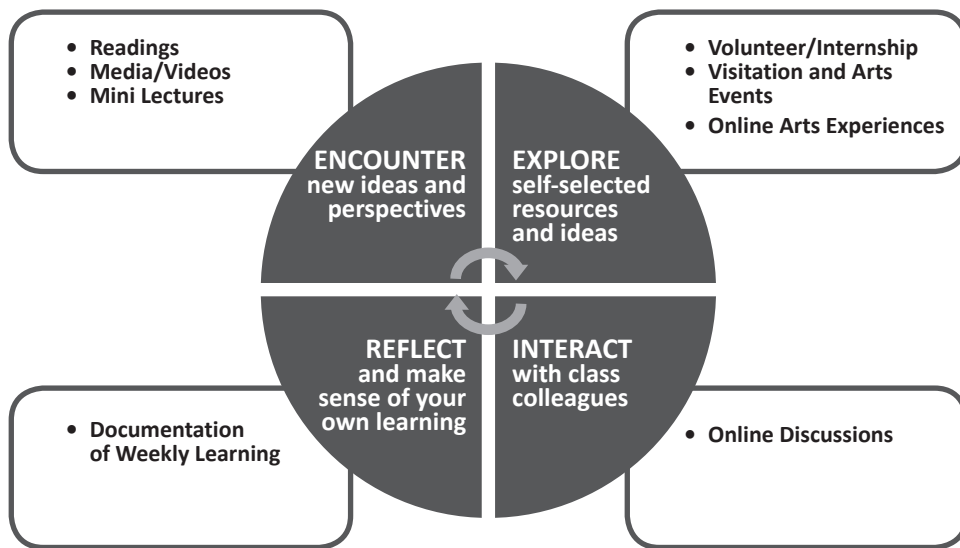


Figure 1. Learning Process



Figure 2. Multi-Faceted Man