“He looks like he needs glasses,” quips one student, gazing at the young Florentine who stands with one hand on his hip, the other pressing the spine of an almost closed book against a table top so that the book stands upright. He marks his place with an index finger. Slightly wall-eyed, the young man seems at once to be staring back at us, and also looking at Michelangelo in the portrait hanging in the corner across the floor. Would he have benefited from eyeglasses? Were they invented, and were they available where he lived? We wonder about the book he is reading. Was it printed on a moveable-type press? He is clad all in black, a color favored by many New Yorkers, and his jacket has stylish slits “like my jeans,” says one student. The Renaissance comes alive for these students in my Humanism, Science, and Technology (LIB 200) class as they view and brainstorm potential research questions related to Bronzino’s Portrait of a Young Man at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

During the same visit, students enter the space of a Renaissance man, the Liberal Arts Studiolo from the Ducal Palace at Gubbio, a small study with illusionary perspective trompe l’oeil wooden intarsia panels depicting shelves filled with books, musical instruments, a compass, an hourglass, as well as pieces of armor – objects which signify the attributes of the fifteenth century Duke Federico da Montefeltro (Radista et al. 35). How do these objects depict the desirable qualities of an educated and accomplished Renaissance man? What emblems might contemporary liberal arts students choose as symbols of education and accomplishment if they were to construct a modern studiolo?

While today’s general marketplace might require increasing specialization of the worker, the world also needs those who can travel across disciplinary boundaries and analyze information from multiple fields to understand and solve human problems. Those who can see connections across disparate fields and apply them in global ways can be the trailblazers, discoverers, innovators who will build our future.

The scholarship of teaching and learning advocates bridging the artificial constructs of intellectual boundaries between disciplines. “It’s the boundaries themselves that are dumbing us down,” writes Louis Menand (14). In shedding light on interdisciplinary learning communities, Phyllis van Slyck points out the value and “the intellectual benefits of showing students that it is almost impossible to research, understand, or write about a work of literature, a moment in history, a global scientific or technological problem, without exposure to a number of disciplinary perspectives” (167). As a cellist and English professor, I began these border crossings in my courses years ago. Guiding students through disparate fields is a natural part of my pedagogy in teaching English composition and elective courses in addition to the capstone liberal arts course “Humanism, Science and Technology.” My courses chart routes that cross disciplinary boundaries, enabling students to embark on life-long intellectual journeys.

Launching their multidisciplinary research paper projects, students in my section of Writing through Literature (English 102) view Edward Hopper’s painting Nighthawks, listen to Ives’ piece The Unanswered Question, and read Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” Frequently anthologized in texts for freshman composition courses, Hemingway’s short story can be the well-worn subject of humdrum writing assignments. Reading this work in light of other twentieth-century artistic productions invigorates the research process. Students become authorities who read, view, and listen, discovering connections among the story, painting, and musical composition. The result is a richer understanding of the story as well as the zeitgeist of the time period in which it was written.
Effective scaffolding of activities – reading, viewing, and listening – are crucial to the assignment’s success. Students first engage in a close reading of Hemingway’s story, examining this tale of a lonely old man who has recently failed an attempt at suicide and seeks refuge from existential loneliness by frequenting a café late at night. Students compare the attitudes of the two waiters who discuss the elderly patron behind his back; the older is sympathetic and the younger resents keeping the café open late because he is eager to return home to his wife.

Students then view Edward Hopper’s painting *Nighthawks*. They seem fairly visually oriented, able to do a close reading of the painting, analyzing its relatively somber colors, stark lines, and its subject matter – a couple, an isolated man with his back to the viewer, and a waiter at a café late at night. One student recognizes that the scene places the viewer outside the café on the deserted street. Students then complete a “low-stakes” writing assignment, describing the painting and relating the painting to elements of Hemingway’s story.

Crossing into music, students listen to Charles Ives’ piece for solo trumpet, winds, and strings. After the initial hearing, one student comments, “It sounds like movie music.” Though students have noted elements in the lines, composition, and colors of Hopper’s depiction of the scene at the late-night diner presenting a theme of loneliness and isolation, their first response to hearing the Ives piece is the reductive “movie music” statement. This comment, one that students have made in other classes upon exposure to classical music, signals that they need help picking out salient elements in the music. I hum the trumpet’s arching five-note motif, so they can listen for its iterations as they hear the piece again. I then ask, “If the trumpeter’s five-note motif is the question, what is it asking and what kind of answer does it get?” On a second hearing, one student says that the trumpet sounds as though it is asking, “Why do human beings suffer?” Other students note that the woodwind instruments respond to the trumpet’s motif with “gossiping”–like chatter, cacophony that does not satisfactorily answer the trumpet’s query. Students think about the relationship between Ives’s piece and Hemingway’s story. Several feel that the sole trumpeter in the music is like the lonely old man in the story who attempts to drown his deafness and isolation with alcohol. Exploring “texts” in different media – literature, painting, and music – students discover similar underlying themes or emotions and are able to articulate well-substantiated observations.

In Hemingway’s story, one of the waiters at the café recites the Lord’s Prayer, replacing key words with the Spanish word *nada*, nothing. Tracing the rapid changes that occurred in twentieth-century America, some students are able to draw conclusions about how and why a tone of loneliness and malaise pervades these three works. They find resonances among the nihilism expressed by the older waiter’s distorted prayer and the old man’s desperate loneliness in Hemingway’s story, the seemingly disconnected and disaffected people in Hopper’s diner, and the sole trumpet player in Ives’ music. Students begin to trust their ability to make their own observations about works they have read, viewed, and heard, and then extrapolate broader conclusions about modern America. They substantiate their conclusions with evidence drawn from the three works, producing lively, engaged papers.

Curiosity is a bold border-crosser. All disciplines are its destinations. The question is its passport. Students’ questions, reactions, observations about a work of art, a piece of music, a text constitute an ideal passport to inquiry, an occasion for research. If students view the research paper as merely a pre-set itinerary to construct a mosaic of words from the ideas of “authorities” found in libraries or through Internet sources, the results will be lifeless and engagement in learning almost nil. But having contact with art and exploring art through different disciplines changes their horizons.

Interdisciplinary assignments move students towards deeper understanding as they stretch their critical thinking skills and chart the crossroads among various fields. Reflecting upon
works of art and music in conjunction with literature or aspects of science and technology can help students become engaged, active, life-long learners who are prepared to further pursue various avenues of inquiry and draw conclusions from many diverse sources. Critical thinking across disciplinary boundaries develops the agility of mind needed to keep up with the rapid changes in the workplace and in the world. And I, through these multidisciplinary excursions become a traveler, too, a learner still.

Ultimately, multidisciplinary excursions link learning with pleasure – the pleasure of literature, art, and music. That pleasure is apparent as my Humanism, Science, and Technology students behold the famous Kouros statue in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Greek Galleries. He steps forward, eyes set straight ahead; his is a world of idealized forms, proto-Euclidean space, with his squared shoulders, his head’s “front and side planes [that] meet at right angles,” and the two smooth semi-orbits of his derrière (Norris 76). Students marvel at his ornate bands of beadlike locks that remind them of their own intricately multi-braided hairstyles. Next, they view another unclothed youth, the Diadoumenos, a Roman marble copy from the first century AD of the Greek sculptor Polykleitos’ bronze statue of the fifth century BC (Norris 127). Clear afternoon sunlight pours over his developed muscles, more anatomically molded than those of the Kouros. Two female students, slender, clad in jeans, their hair long, dark and free, sidle around the figure, admiring him. One smiles when her classmate says, “Nice buns!”

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WORKS CITED


Diadoumenos (Youth Tying a Fillet around His Head). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.


