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Citation: Pace, I. (2024). The Trouble with Diversity. *Café Américain*,

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Café Américain

IAN PACE

The Trouble With Diversity

Academic Diversity Approaches Reduce Education to Tourism

27 September 2024 - <https://cafeamericainmag.com/the-diversity-fetish/>

The [BA course in English Language and Literature at Oxford University](#) is highly impressive. It is unique in the United Kingdom in requiring all students to study all periods of English literature, from the early medieval period to the present day. All students must also study Shakespeare separately. Then they have a range of options from the Icelandic saga through the American novel after 1945 or post-war British drama, to writing feminisms/feminist writing, afrofabulation, or film criticism. Other [highly-ranked English courses](#) are somewhat less fastidious and comprehensive. The main [undergraduate course at St Andrews](#) allows students to study comparative literature or drama in place of historical modules, while [at Durham](#), thematically-focused modules on drama, the novel, poetry, Shakespeare, and the theory and practice of literary criticism take the place of historical ones.

All those who design such curricula need to balance various concerns. How much should be compulsory, how much left to student choice (at what stage does the latter generate consumerist, ‘Netflix’-style à la carte degrees)? How to ensure students will acquire the sorts of knowledge and skills commensurate with reasonable expectations of their chosen degree? Two terms which are commonly used in this context are *breadth* and *depth*.

The formation of “canons” of work or of key thinkers is often deeply bound up with the needs of teaching. Much has been written on these canons, sometimes of a pejorative nature. Broadly speaking, anti-canonical arguments portray the teaching of a fixed body of work as hegemonic (“Western canons have generally been created and enforced by white males, most of them now dead”), and argue that the teaching of canons serves to “discipline” knowledge in line with particular ideological agendas, often thereby marginalizing minorities.

Not all such arguments are without foundation, and literary, musical and artistic canons have indeed sometimes been modified for the better as a result of them.

[I have however argued the case elsewhere](#) for the necessity and inevitability of canons. Canonical processes can be found in artistic traditions in most times and places, while simple valorization of some artistic works over others can be found even in the most casual of discussions between non-academics. Canons shift over time and place, are not always identical in different regions, and the basis upon which they are formed cannot simply be reduced to the exercise of power.

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But perhaps most importantly, canons of some type are necessary to teach any body of work, historical period or intellectual tradition. Anyone who has had to do this within ten short lectures will know the brutal choices which need to be made; the idea that such teaching can eschew any sort of “exclusion” is a fantasy. But whenever some pattern of inclusion and exclusion is observable across a range of different teaching, there has emerged at least the beginnings of a canonical approach.

I have myself regularly grappled with this issue when teaching music modules. One on Western music from 1848 to the present day was the most challenging, as I tried to respond to valid scholarly criticisms of established approaches. My solution was to structure the course around the wider history of the period, using a representative sample of work in both “classical” and “popular” genres (without favouring either), and then to invite students to reflect on possible relationships between the two types of samples. But this was challenging, as students often have little if any basic knowledge about the revolutions of 1848, the Russian Revolution, or the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, necessitating provision of much supporting historical information.

Teaching music since the 19th century is challenging, when students often have little if any basic knowledge about the revolutions of 1848, the Russian Revolution, or the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Feedback, the quality of submitted work, and the ways the module “fed” into others, made me believe it a success. But I still encountered from some academics a common type of opposition. While I restricted my attention to music produced in Europe (as far east as Russia) and North America, and there was a very prominent role for African American traditions from spirituals through blues and jazz to contemporary hip hop, this was not enough to stop some attacking the simple fact the module was “Western”, rather than more “diverse”.

Any broad piece of teaching or writing could be different given more time or space. [*The Cambridge History of the Cold War*](#) is three large volumes, as is [*The Cambridge History of Russia*](#). The former covers a much wider geographical area, the latter a much longer period in history. To criticize one for not being the other is idle. Criticism on grounds of exclusion can be applied to anything which is not a complete history of everything, everywhere, at every time.

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Some “diversity” demands take insufficient account of differences of type, not only quantity. Obviously cross-cultural interactions were more limited in times before modern travel and communications. Reading the 11th century Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji* alongside *The Song of Roland*, or the early 18th century Japanese classic *Oku no Hosomichi* alongside *Robinson Crusoe* could give students some sense of the range of global literary work created during roughly similar times, but would convey little about relationships resulting from cultural and other interactions, such as

would be the case if Defoe were read alongside Samuel Richardson, or indeed if *The Tale of Genji* were considered [in the context of Chinese literary traditions of the time](#). There is in my opinion much benefit in studying culture not simply in isolation, but as part of interconnected forms of production. But this is different from trying to cram into a syllabus cultures and traditions that are not in fact connected.

Moreover, many global artistic traditions will be unfamiliar to many Western students. Those without family or friends of Tanzanian origin are unlikely to have had many encounters with [traditional Gogo singing](#), let alone the social contexts in which such music emerged. That is not a reason not to teach such material properly, as something more than a variety of exotica. But because of such unfamiliarity, more time is needed for immersion. To provide this for Tanzanian or other global musical traditions would require a significant part of a curriculum. This is not realistic except in the case that a university department attracts a very specific student cohort with an active and likely prior interest in Gogo music. But one cannot create courses with more widespread appeal on this basis, and universities need to recruit and retain students in order to survive.

As with music, so with language. The history of the growth of the English language, like that of Spanish or Arabic, is deeply tied to imperial histories. A genuinely “decolonial” educational program in the West, and especially the English-speaking world, would insist on a much greater amount of language learning, including that of non-European languages, from an early age. This would enable access to different literatures as well as communication between peoples. However, I rarely see such broadening presented as a central concern of “diversity”.

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The two most common alternative responses are “touristic” education, in which a wide range of different areas are touched upon only cursorily; or simple “presentism”, eschewing historical study altogether, usually in favour of focusing on highly commercial work from today. Such superficial “diversity” does little to challenge students to leave their comfort zones and enter into new worlds of experience, nor to understand how and why the present is how it is. One can indeed teach anime, manga, or Bollywood, all of which already have a significant presence in the West, or K-pop, whose stylistic attributes (like most commercial traditions) overlap much more with Western popular music than with Korean musical traditions. But, deeply ingrained into the cultural mode of the West, none of these phenomena have anything significant to do with “diversity”.

We are obviously living in the present, and so present-day concerns have an immediacy which naturally exceed that of earlier eras’ preoccupations. But almost no art comes from nowhere, and there is a real need for universities, and schools, to provide some more foundational contextual knowledge of art, if artworks are to be more than just atomized entities. [The musicologist and novelist Eva Moreda Rodriguez highlighted problems of this nature](#) when she wrote of playing students a piece involving a distorted take on Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, only to find that just one had heard the opera, and just two or three had even heard of Puccini.

Real “diversity” would amount to new concentrations upon (and investment in) Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist history, thought and culture, detailed critical examination of oral histories of particular mostly pre-literate areas of sub-Saharan Africa and South America, Southern Indian Carnatic musical traditions, Arabic *khatt* (calligraphy), the classical novels and dramas of China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and elsewhere, or non-European languages such as Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Hausa, Yoruba, Bengali, Hindi, Mandarin, Japanese or Quechuan.

None of these are areas to be taken lightly, or that can be dealt with satisfactorily in just one or two lectures. Massive sacrifices of depth for breadth, decontextualization, and usually also avoidance of technical engagement with an art-form, make “diversity” a meaningless concept. Touristic learning can be achieved simply by reading *Rough Guides* or *Lonely Planet* books, while presentist education, voided of wider contextualizing perspectives which are not simply subservient to the present, will date extremely quickly. Education needs to deal with the “how” and the “why”, not just primarily the “what”.