What if cultural understanding were taught at uni, rather than assumed?
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Students in Return Of Return, the SMU production that gave rise to the undergraduate course Choreographing the City-State: Dance and Multiculturalism in Singapore. Learning about the various dance traditions that shaped Singapore, and dancing together, helps students cultivate empathy, appreciation and respect for diversity, say the writers. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

What if cultural understanding were taught at uni, rather than assumed?

Students may no longer have the time to learn organically about one another's culture. Here's where universities must plug the gap.

Mark Chong, Darlene Machell de Leon Espena and Jimmy Ye

Where, exactly, do our students learn to cross a cultural boundary? For most of the past two decades the answer has been, in effect, somewhere else. In a co-curricular activity, over lunch, on a study mission, in the ordinary friction and friendship of campus life. Cultural literacy was something a university created the conditions for and then trusted to emerge. It was rarely taught, and almost never assessed.

Student life has since changed shape, and internships are among the clearest causes. Undergraduates now spend far more of their unstructured time in workplaces, and these include non-profits and public agencies. Placements have grown longer, and many students now take on more than one. This is a rational response to a competitive graduate market, giving students exposure to real-world challenges, and in many respects a good thing. But those hours must come from somewhere. They come from precisely the parts of university life that were never compulsory: the co-curricular activities, the productions, the long arguments with people who see the world differently.

DEVELOPING A MULTICULTURAL 'THIRD SPACE'

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam has championed the idea that embracing one another's cultures can strengthen Singaporeans' shared identity. He envisions a multicultural "third space" – a creative domain where different cultures meet, borrow from one another, and mutually enrich their practices without erasing their distinct traditions – that can keep Singapore resilient, dynamic and unified. He has also been clear that such a space cannot be manufactured to a template. That is exactly why the question of where it grows deserves an answer.

The need is not hypothetical. The IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony, published in February 2025 from a survey of 4,000 residents, found that trust between communities has risen steadily: The proportion of Singaporeans who do not trust more than half of another racial group fell from 42.7% in 2013 to 27.1% in 2024.

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But trust has not translated into curiosity. Only 41.8% said they were interested in understanding the customs and practices of other racial groups and the share who admitted to forming assumptions about someone's behaviour based on race actually rose, from 35.2% in 2018 to 43.5% in 2024, even as 71.1% maintained that race does not influence their social interactions.

Trust between communities in Singapore is high, and that is a genuine achievement. However, having the confidence that a neighbour of a different race would help in a crisis is not equivalent to knowing why they believe what they believe in. We can learn to coexist, but crossing the cultural boundary is a different matter.

LEARNING THROUGH DANCE

There is a saying, commonly attributed to Confucius: I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand. It is quoted often enough to have worn smooth, but it names something education keeps undervaluing. Some things are understood only in the doing, and multiculturalism, of all subjects, is one of them.

Universities have long acted on that premise, if not always by design. At Singapore Management University (SMU), every undergraduate completes at least 80 hours of community service and, since 2018, a period overseas, whether on exchange, a study mission or a service project. Students also take on live projects with companies, non-profits and public agencies. These are third spaces in all, and in each, cultural understanding is at least a strong by-product.

Choreographing the City-State: Dance and Multiculturalism in Singapore grew out of Return Of Return, an SMU production, rather than from any academic committee. It is open to every undergraduate, with or without a dance background. Students engage with scholarship, historical analysis and critical discussion, and take part in practice-based workshops. The objective is not simply to learn dance techniques, but to examine how dance reflects and shapes larger questions of identity, community and nationhood. The course traces how Malay, Chinese and Indian traditions have shaped, and been shaped by, Singapore's social and political life since the 1960s.

Learning about the various dance traditions that shaped Singapore, and dancing together, helps students cultivate empathy, appreciation and respect for diversity. These are the very same values that equip us to work in global workplaces and international teams, where communication styles differ and the risk is always ethnocentrism — taking one's own way of doing things as the standard, and reading difference as deficiency.

DISTINCTLY HUMAN CAPABILITIES

It would be easy to present all of this as an answer to artificial intelligence. It is not. The course was not conceived as a response to technological change. But when access to information and analysis has never been easier because of AI, the value of an education shifts towards fostering what is distinctly human: empathy, emotional intelligence, imagination and the capacity to work with people rather than around them.

A 21-year-old accountancy student learning a Malay step will almost certainly never perform it, and no skills framework anywhere asks for it. That is rather the point. An education built only around what can be listed in a skills framework has a shelf life shorter than the career it is meant to prepare someone for. What a room like that leaves behind is the habit of being a beginner again, in good company, without embarrassment, which is the one thing a long life of change reliably demands.

A third space cannot be built to order. But it grows more readily where people have practised the crossing, and a university is as good a place as any to hold the door open while it does.

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