G O O D B Y E T O T H E  
A U T D a n c e  
P r o g r a m m e

Dr. Linda Ashley and Jennifer Nikolai

This dialogue captures the close working relationship that shaped the Bachelor of Dance’s (BDance) philosophy, as passionate lecturers and highly capable students collaborated to develop an innovative programme of tertiary dance study.

Linda: “I remember in 2005 when I started working with BDance at AUT and realised that you and I would in fact be implementing the reconstructed procedure from scratch! It seemed like an opportunity to create a community of learning, different from any other tertiary dance programme. Our teaching philosophies overlapped – honouring student voices, but challenging and broadening their notions of what dance is. That’s why ‘Dancing with Difference’ became our marketing catchphrase.”

Jennifer: “I remember this as if it were yesterday. We worked in tandem for the next few years delivering dance papers in the new degree, reflecting on feedback and making necessary changes. The programme became strong and we worked hard to foster a non-competitive dance community, student-centred and inclusive of diversity.”

The AUT University’s School of Sport and Recreation and the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences are to be congratulated on their vision when they first saw the need for BDance in New Zealand. Even more to be admired was the decision to continue to support the degree after a challenging start. Dr. Alice Knappstein and Jennifer Nikolai undertook the programme rewrite in 2004. From 2005, the implementation resulted in a successful community of tertiary dance teaching, learning and research, making AUT’s 2010 decision to close the programme a disappointment to many.

In 2005, BDance led New Zealand tertiary dance study in making one of its points of difference, the implementation of teaching from a theory/practice strategy: in: scholarly and artistic practice; learning and assessment; a teaching-research nexus; and interdisciplinary collaboration across the University, the wider community and the dance industry. A memorable success reflecting this strategy was our panel, Exploring the dance research nexus in tertiary dance studies, presented at the 2008 World Dance Alliance Conference in Brisbane by Ashley (convenor), Nikolai, Molloy (part time lecturer) and Kramer (BDance alumnus).

The BDance students studied contemporary, ballet, jazz and hip hop, led by permanent and guest lecturers; as well as site-specific work, contact improvisation, dance for camera, and teaching and learning in a studio environment.

The Dance Education paper focused on understanding and implementing the dance component of New Zealand’s national curriculum. Three Dance Studies papers provided perspectives on dance in socio-historical contexts in application to the students’ own choreographic processes. Dance in Cultural Context examined dances from several different cultures, featuring high quality teachers such as Valance Smith, Kenethi Muaia, Kanan Debhakta, to name a few. The Drama paper emphasised New Zealand’s dramatic history, acting, improvisation and production elements.

Throughout the third year, students carried out a research project of their own choice on an industry placement, a culmination of the theory practice approach. Threads of safe practice, applied anatomy, choreography, contextual perspectives, philosophy pertaining to dance, and cyclical reflection were woven throughout the papers. From this holistic approach, a postgraduate cohort was beginning to grow. We trust that these researchers will find ways to follow their valuable initiatives.

AUT’s partnership with Britain’s prestigious Royal Academy of Dance was the first such arrangement worldwide, enabling students to graduate with an internationally recognised registration to teach ballet. Other incentives we are proud of include Touchdown where our students visited schools, performing and leading workshops. The AUT Dance Research Seminar Series, Intersections, raised awareness of dance research for AUT students and the community at large. In 2008, Linda and Jennifer received the Vice Chancellor’s Excellence in Teaching Award.

The AUT Dance Company was another innovatory feature of our research strategy. Its practice-led research model allowed alumni, dance staff and guest choreographers, including Timothy Gordon, Kathleen Malee-Smith and Moana Nepia, to develop and present their work.

The BDance earned a reputation for producing graduates who successfully gained employment in a range of careers, some of which are represented in the following commentaries:

Sarala Niven, owner of Great South Ballet Academy: “The variety of electives, aside from dance, is what made BDance both unique and powerful, and enabled me to teach. Now, just two years out of the degree, I took over a business which has more than doubled in size.”

Ben Rogers, youth programmes coordinator for YMCA North Shore: “I am starting up a dance project called V-dance for 20-30 teenagers. Workshops involve choreographic tasks and developmental activities where students apply what is learnt in the dance studio to areas of their own life.”

Erin Bowerman, AUT Master of Sport and Exercise postgraduate: “Thanks to the incredible BDance staff and students, I am now privileged to experience the world of postgraduate study in a newly developing area, being one of a few people nationwide furthering the sector of Dance Science. My current dream job combining the conditioning and coaching of elite adolescent dancers is also a direct result of BDance study.”

Alana Shannon (nee Basile), Primary School Teacher, Bellevue Hill Public School, NSW: “After completing a Master of Teaching (Primary) at the University of Sydney, I gained a permanent position as a classroom teacher. Due to my BDance degree they saw me as a classroom teacher who could implement dance programmes across the school - which is what I am doing and enjoying every minute of bringing dance to children. It is unheard of to get a permanent position straight out of university in NSW, most graduate teachers teach in casual and temporary positions for at least 2 years before landing a permanent position - some are never successful.”

BDance’s relationships with DANZ, the Tertiary Dance Educators Network of New Zealand, other tertiary dance providers and RAD were a constant source of support. We are grateful to Janet Taylor, Sue Nicholls, Carole Spears (RAD NZ) and Philippa Pidgeon (RAD paper leader). We sincerely thank all guest lecturers that contributed to BDance!

At the time of closure in 2010, we were at the point of making further cutting-edge innovations to papers. We will continue to fuel the AUT Dance Company for the foreseeable future.