

Dancing with Dolly: Linda Ashley’s enduring legacy

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Linda would laugh at me. I have spent most of the time in writing this article trying to compose a title. No title conveys what I want to say: “you will teach us forever” or; “your impact lives on”; or even “*Exploring the dance research nexus in tertiary dance studiesⁱ as inspired by Linda Ashley.*” A title can’t express my gratitude to my friend and colleague for the impact she has and the legacy she has left behind. My aim is that in writing to her, for her, about her, I can convey my thanks or our collective thanks. She would laugh at me and just tell me to write a—something like: *Dancing and thinking and talking and writing*. And with her magic wand directed my way she may say, ‘Tiddly pom’.

Being asked to write about Linda Ashley just over a year since her passing would be challenging for most of her colleagues, previous students and friends. Like me, many would not know how to give voice to the deep and abiding grace, the gifts of collegiality and friendship we feel still woven into our daily lives. I am the lecturer I am today because Linda was my close friend and colleague, a generous mentor who had, and still has, a profound, enduring impact on me.

We met in 2005 under forced circumstances. Forced, in that we only had each other, as dance academics, to recruit students, write curriculum and implement new papers in an emerging Bachelor of Dance (BDance) degree at Auckland University of Technology. Our teaching philosophies overlapped, and our friendship deepened through these shared philosophies. I know that Linda found immense purpose and applied her talents immediately in developing and teaching the BDance. What felt like more than a decade, was less than a decade in a mutually rich, shared leadership relationship within the ‘emerging’ Bachelor of Dance degree. We shared the development and teaching of papers within all three years of the BDance. We fostered a supportive student community of experiential, reciprocal pedagogies; in the dance studio, in community contexts and in dance research opportunities we created with, and for, our students. We were totally

ⁱ This was the title for a panel presentation—see Ashley, Nikolai, Molloy, & Kramer (2008).

committed to supporting the Bachelor of Dance and our current students and alumni, so when the programme closed and esteemed colleagues were made redundant, we reluctantly closed that ‘opportunity’, which from our perspective was ‘only just’ growing in strength. In 2013, when we co-wrote our ‘goodbye’ to BDance, we wrote in dialogical tandem, and these were Linda’s opening words:

Yes and that’s where our teaching philosophies overlapped—honouring each students’ voice and dance experience, but also challenging and broadening their notions of what dance ‘is’ and how we learn in, through and about dance. That’s why ‘Dancing with Difference’ became our catchphrase for our marketing materials. I even made a dance named that in 2009 and now also have a new book published under the same title! (Ashley & Nikolai, 2013, p. 17.)

In 2005, I had only been at AUT for two years when Linda was hired and our stars collided. We needed each other to support and develop a new degree that had many flourishing years ahead with incredible students who, to this day, are family. She was my mentor; a fellow passionate lecturer, who taught me so much about lecturing and reflection, about reciprocity in how we shared our learning with our students, with our fine colleagues and with each other. Our shared working relationship with a community of dance lecturers and students shaped the BDance philosophy. We worked with delight and endless rigour for so many years, with exceptional, highly capable students who have impacted the dance community both in NZ and abroad. Our students were the key factor in supporting the teaching-research nexus, the reciprocal learning and teaching environment that Linda inspired as a guiding philosophy in the degree we established.

At the height of the synergy of the new BDance degree, in 2008, Linda invited and invented opportunities for lecturers and students alike to identify the nexus in learning and teaching processes. She mentored us all through a process of articulating how the teaching-research nexus was alive in the Bachelor of Dance. It was a busy, productive year filled with sparkle and sincere joy... Linda loved 2008. So I have chosen an example of one of Linda’s tertiary education collaborations as a place from which many other examples arose. My chosen example resolves for me so much of what Linda offered and left us. In and around my reflections I find myself laughing, crying and writing. She would say again, “just write.”

Yes—talking and writing as dance practices could be overlooked, and such an oversight could create a space of denial of the forces of human language, philosophy and concept formation that are, arguably, essential activities when people create cultures. I think that it is easy to overlook the illusive reflexive turns that sometimes people perform (Ashley, 2014b, p. 31).

This passage refers to how Linda invited theory and practice to overlap. She argued repeatedly that theory and practice were interdependent in dance. She applied this in her teaching practice (of course, with a sense of humour). In 2008 Linda and I received the Vice Chancellor’s Excellence in Teaching Award from Auckland University of Technology. Linda reflected on the topic of her design for learning, in which each individual is considered in decision-making. She advocated for “discussions that broaden the students’ own ‘danceworlds’ [to] encourage them to take an active role in their learning” (Ashley & Nikolai, 2008). In our portfolio, Linda collated a beautifully articulated document that was read by the panel. Not many other readers have actually seen this portfolio. In the portfolio document there are copious photographs of BDance students (taken over 4 years) in multiple settings. Most of the photos captured students laughing, dancing or performing, some writing and laughing. Many of the photos were of Linda and her students laughing beside her, holding her, being hugged by her. This is what we see. This is what we remember; but it’s all held together by her on-going debate that theory and practice in dance create longitudinal learning and curiosity that give students their active role in learning, for themselves. To her, this was IT.

‘Which came first?’ in terms of theory and practice was up for debate in Linda’s view (Ashley, 2014b). “We privilege one over the other at our peril, for both seem, to me at least, to be in constant interactive flux. Sometimes the word can be the action and vice versa, depending on your academic and cultural persuasions” (Ashley, 2014b, p. 32). So Linda created theory/practice opportunities. In her years in the AUT Bachelor of Dance programme, she was surrounded by tertiary student ‘dancer-researchers’ whom she mentored. For example, she invited students to create, present and perform alongside lecturers as reciprocal collaborators in practice. Our shared practice was teaching and research and research and teaching; thinking, dancing and writing, where learning and teaching was woven between student and lecturer. Her actions motivated our shared praxis: as colleagues, peers, collaborators, as students and teachers. Our praxis was reflective reciprocity in action, stemmed from “the belief that [the]

research process ‘needs to be made more explicit and visible for all students’” (Zubrick et al., 2001, p. 226). One such example was revealed in the panel presentation that highlighted examples of the teaching-research nexus within the degree.

As lecturers in the Bachelor of Dance degree, Linda Ashley, Felicity Molloy and I attempted to de-mystify research as inquiry that shapes critique and change in our discipline. Following Linda’s lead, we took it on ourselves to introduce research thinking (and dancing) into an undergraduate community. We embedded horizontal approaches to researching dance-inspired inquiry through practical application. Integrating a horizontal domain within a choreography class or studio process is informed by Lavender (2009); in this context, the lecturer and student share a non-assessed experience that shifts conventions of formalist choreography classes. The horizontal relationship breaks down the usual barriers between the teacher and the student who asks “what the teacher wants” as the guiding question. The emphasis in our choreography classes was to break down a potentially “subservient role within a vertical domain, “expert/critic” gate-keeping orientation to teaching and learning” (Lavender, 2009, p. 385).

In our ‘annus mirabilis’ of 2008, we presented our diverse approaches to establishing a teaching-research nexus in tertiary dance, within Auckland University of Technology’s Bachelor of Dance. Our panel for the World Dance Alliance Global Summit Brisbane, Australia, 13-18 July 2008, was chaired by colleague Felicity Molloy, who had been teaching in a range of papers within the Bachelor of Dance programme. Linda set our panel’s objective: to cooperate with peer lecturers and students on shared choreographic collaborations. Her guardianship practice in the teaching-research nexus prompted collective insights as thematic landings for our panel presentation. As the first panellist, Linda spoke to her interest “in the field of study into dance and ageing”. She shared her choices in developing a “dance research monologue” as a blend of “academic and artistic forms” (Ashley et. al., 2008). For Linda, the crucial thing was to develop relationships between students, colleagues and her own research practice as she created and performed an (admittedly) autobiographical character called ‘Dolly’.

Linda as ‘Dolly’ provoked playful, otherwise difficult discussions and gave weight to critical topics otherwise not critiqued. In Linda’s presentations she argued for an unprecedented respect towards ageing as a dancer. She shared ‘Dolly’ with audiences in conventional venues such as classrooms, theatres, in academic venues such as conferences and symposia; places where lecturers

and students make, perform, speak and present dance research together as a “mutually beneficial dance teaching-research nexus” (Ashley et. al., 2008). Linda’s performance, *The revenge of the dolly mixture: The youthanasia of dance* (Ashley & Nikolai, 2006), was developed and varied, and involved a range of students and colleagues as cameos in her performances. Linda’s ‘Dolly’ marked a significant turn for me, when she asked me to cameo as an ageing dancer. She asked me, she argued, because I had recently entered my thirties. Naively, I had not considered age much in relationship to making, speaking and writing dance previously. She led me through what I reflect on now as a warm-up. I retrospectively recognise my commitment to dancing as I experience my forties and beyond ... as embracing the value of accumulated years of practice and reflection. She opened considerations for me, that now inform my long-term research project with dancers spanning their forties, fifties and sixties, conducted in Canada. Dancing with ‘Dolly’, I see now, gave me a visceral understanding of how age makes the dancer resilient in thinking, writing, and dancing as long as possible. ‘Dolly’ demystified ageing, and critiqued ageism. This is what Linda did, even as her time with us was cut short.

At the WDA, Brisbane (Ashley et al., 2008), Linda’s panel presentation focused on developing ‘Dolly’ in the context of academic lecturing, and on how adolescent/young adult voices provided her with insight and commentary. This was her theory, which reflected her practice. I saw her, time and again, bounce her own thinking off student perceptions, integrating them into her satirical commentary and simultaneous celebration of youth and ageing in the context of performing dance. She opened her tertiary students’ eyes, or rather encouraged them to see dance, and themselves, in ways that were true to themselves.

Sitting next to Linda in Brisbane, thinking back now, I see her influence in the way I, in my panel presentation, reflected on a collaborative choreographic process with undergraduate students in a piece called *motion.stop.motion* (Nikolai et al., 2007). I felt at the time—and still do—that research with tertiary students encourages the development of tools for consideration, as in compositional structures and collaborative making processes. Linda put her horizontal thinking into practice by including a student on the panel, who spoke also to the importance of dance as research, and the value of working alongside lecturers in the process of making and thinking about dance.

The third panelist was a recent graduate and one of our valued alumni. Kezia Crawford (nee Kramer) is part of the BDance family, a very close group of special students who still respect our shared experiences in the BDance, and who inspire the students they now teach as they pass the fire on. We all shared the planning and preparation of the panel with each other. We dialogued in a manner that none of us had, previously. We had been offered a catalysing experience that all of us needed in order to respect the nexus further and motivate deeper embedded structures and opportunities in future processes. To contextualize the panel as one example of what Linda offered, leads to multiple examples.

Linda also mounted tertiary dance writing seminars, conferences, projects, performances and panels, as if they were a ritual practiced daily, as delightful as drinking her cup of morning coffee. Every morning upon arriving at work, Linda and I would wait for each other to go and get a soy latte to sip on, while planning and scheming—Linda made research events happen as easily as she pulled out coins from her purse to treat me to a coffee. Planning symposia, workshops, school tours ... such activities were to be performed for the sheer pleasure of making something more than mundane of the moment. Linda curated 'Intersections', a teaching-research nexus symposium shared between academics, students and the wider community. She directed three Intersections symposia between 2006 and 2008. The final 'Intersections' event culminated in 'Intersections 3' Tertiary Crossroads: AUT Dance Research Seminar Series. Hamilton, New Zealand. Junction 3: Alternate Routes Theme: Interdisciplinary Practice AUT, Waikato University Research Series. Hamilton. The metaphor laid out pathways for students and lecturers in all stages of their research trajectories to share and discover research unfolding for and within a range of communities.

Graeme Sullivan (2010) expresses caution about prescribing specific analytical frameworks for artist practitioners for the purpose of examining the relationship between theory and practice. His suggested individualized approach is one that Linda encouraged in me. She didn't give up. She said to me repeatedly, 'never give up'. That is what holds me today; thanks Linda, once again. I action her words, as choosing individual or preferred methods should function to normalise practice (Sullivan, 2010). Such a teasing suggestion has had a direct impact on practicing teaching and research and repeatedly questioning how to practice the teaching-research nexus in a tertiary institution. Sullivan on art practice states that:

When seen in relation to surrounding empiricist, interpretivist, and critical research traditions, different practices emerge as artistic inquiry twists and braids in response to purposes and possibilities. This dynamic process opens up several *relational* and *transformative* research practices that are found *within* and *across*, *between* and *around* the framework... (2010, p. 102)

I believe that for dance artists, the accumulation of years of practice of discipline knowledge, mentorship (as mentor and mentee), and reflection on practice encourages the synthesis of a tacit experience with formal training and mentorship. Interpreting Sullivan's description as transformative, I believe the shared, interchangeable space of mentor and mentee informs research projects with and around students and colleagues, where there is an inevitable integration of theory and practice. Linda was a mentor and mentee for many dance educators, internationally.

At the time of her death (2016), Linda was waiting for the publication of her co-edited book *Intersecting cultures in music and dance education: An Oceanic perspective*. David Lines, her co-editor, co-author and friend dedicated their book to Linda Ashley with the acknowledgement that she has inspired dance and arts educators not only in Oceania but internationally.

My ongoing research since 2004 in which I endeavour to explore how to better understand why and how dance educators can build respect for the people whose dances and cultures are studied in dance education, as well as treat the dances ethically and contribute to their conservation rather than their erosion. The resulting multiple layers of considerations make the exploration of connected ideologies, theory and practice in this chapter an essential part of understanding what we, as dance educators, are doing, why we are doing it and how we may best provide culturally democratic dance education. (Ashley & Lines, 2016, p. 177)

Linda's doctoral thesis, an ethnographic study on teaching about dance in schools from cross-cultural perspectives, became integral to this final text (Ashley, 2014a, 2014b). In her discussion on a range of challenges encountered during a course she led for dance educators, the published journal article "has significance for teacher education in countries that have multicultural profiles" (Ashley, 2014a).

Her doctoral research encouraged trajectories on the subject of culturally pluralist pedagogies in the New Zealand context (Ashley, 2014a). Linda provided opportunities for dance educators in schools (primary, intermediate, secondary and tertiary), to enter into open dialogues and expand opportunities towards contextualising culturally diverse dance in Aotearoa.ⁱⁱ

Writing with Linda, and now, writing on remembering Linda, has given me the opportunity to formally recognize and respect Linda's impact on a large and international dance community. I reflect on how she insisted upon reflection, and written reflection in action, or as action occurred. Journaling was a core practice for her. Linda kept copious, colourful, hand-written, diagrammatic, imagery-based journals; each nuanced with individuality. She kept me sketching. I sketch my reflections and Linda encouraged them to be plans, thoughts, reactions, notes, scribbles about classes, about moments of what was and what would be. My teaching-research praxis continues through variations on the experiences I had reflecting-in-action with my colleague and friend beside me. What remains of Linda's teaching are her clear objectives and suggestive tasks she instilled in teaching or in the studio. She left me with notes, journals and hand-drawn diagrams, words, paragraphs. She encouraged me to reflect using still and moving images on camera, on notepads, on each of our tongues as we still reminisce on practice as transformed. Still moving. Her handwriting, her words, still move.

Not a day goes by that I don't thank Linda for what she generously offered, and in my own way, I know she knows. I am not the only one who is grateful. I cannot count us all. I cannot represent us all. But I can aim to represent an ethos of thanks, of endless gratitude - the kind that endures and becomes more deeply embedded every day. She was a mentor, she was a friend, she was an inspiration and she was a leader. Welby Ings, in his book *Disobedient Teaching; Surviving and Creating Change in Education* (Ings, 2017), wrote under the sub-heading 'play and display':

Students need to mix with authentic adults because such people provide natural models of how to navigate flaws, learn productively from failure and resolve problems in effective ways. Kids need to see teachers who trade beyond experience and disobey limited thinking because this is something they are also learning to do. (Ings, 2017, p. 112)

ⁱⁱ(Ashley, 2005a, 2005b, 2008).

Linda gave her students her authentic self. I witnessed her being most herself when with them. She was charged by them as they experimented with a variation on the ‘disobeying’ Welby Ings refers to. Linda was mentoring their disobeying in a way that individualized every student experience so they made their learning for themselves and then kept it. They have their own learning now, to be passed on. I, too, gathered authentic moments from Linda that I’ll pass on. When I write, I remember the lessons she shared with me on writing. When I teach around complicated challenges in assessment practices, I wonder ‘what would Linda Ashley do?’ When I research and reflect on the teaching-research nexus daily, I recognize now, as I age, what she passed to me when I was younger and faster, when I recovered from injury more rapidly, when I travelled from a jump to a fall back to a jump more readily; she was passing along her research inquiries around ageing and representing dance on stage, through verbal commentary and her ‘Dolly’, who advocated ‘we should never give up’. She initiated a respect towards ageing dance as a topic of inquiry to be shared between the lecturer and the student. I, too, was learning from her; about asking how to sustain dance through our lifespan, ageing being inevitable and dancing being what we do, at any stage in our lifespan. I play with Linda’s inspirations now and hope to always, as I still feel her vibrancy, her energy, her sense of humour in the choices I make as part of her larger, inspired community of dance scholars. If she could ‘Pling’ⁱⁱⁱ any moment of serious contemplation, she would do so with respect and contextualization of what was more important, and most important. A laugh was always her priority, with full integrity. If you were a student of Linda’s, you’ll know that laugh.

“In the end, it’s all about the students” (Ashley, any given day).

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ⁱⁱⁱ Linda had a magic fairy wand. Paragraph one of this essay refers to this same ‘magic’ wand. She might have had a few fairy wands and she gave them as gifts to her students and colleagues over the years. With her magic wand, she would approach those of us in deep contemplation or despair and simply by saying ‘Pling’ with a gentle wave of her wand, she had her victims in hysterics. It worked, always.

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