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TRAINING THE THINKING DANCER
Creating Careers in Dance in the 21st Century
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1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1. The changing environment

Currently we are living in an environment of constantly increasing changes in lifestyle, work patterns and technological advances, sometimes referred to as the ‘information age’. Coaldrake and Stedman (1998:33) prefer to speak of a ‘knowledge society’, since knowledge incorporates understanding in a way which information does not.\(^1\) However, understanding operates in many contexts. One of the challenges for dance education is to expand the context of students to prepare them for a globalised and at the same time regionalised future. We also need to expand horizons, not just cognitively, but in ways that encompass the affective, imaginative, sensory and embodied knowledge domains that are fundamental to dance and the arts. At the same time, dance and dance training must accommodate and predict new knowledge domains so that our practitioners and students will be equipped to function effectively in the 21st century.

At QUT, Creative Industries Dance is creating a learning environment which we believe addresses these changes, through training ‘thinking’ dance practitioners by:

- maintaining and developing students’ passion for dance via increasing embodied dance knowledge in intensive studio-based practice;
- providing contextual learning in dance-specific, cultural and technological literacies;
- making connections through partnerships, work placements and external projects;
- broadening knowledge beyond dance to cultural and creative industries and interdisciplinary practice;
- producing ‘life-long learners’ through a student centred approach which encourages independent thinking and inquiry in collaborative teams and individually.

1.2. Historical perspective

In some areas, the above goals are quite different from when QUT Dance was established in 1979, as a diploma course to train professional dancers. This occurred within Brisbane College of Advanced Education which amalgamated with QUT in

1990. Today Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is one of Australia's largest universities, enrolling 40,000 students with almost 5,000 from overseas.

Over 25 years the dance program at QUT has built a national and international reputation for the high technical standard and versatility of its performance students and for the employability of its graduates in all areas. In the 1990s former Head of Dance, Professor Susan Street, established a number of differentiated courses to train performers, choreographers and educators and her legacy was an important one on which to build.

1.3. Faculty of Creative Industries

I took up my position as Head of Dance in 2000 and in 2001 a major change occurred when the Faculty of Creative Industries was established; the first of its kind in Australia. It combines creativity, technology and enterprise in an interdisciplinary combination. This change was instigated with the recognition that the 21st century was privileging the ‘knowledge society’ (ibid.) and that we operate in a networked world in which creative content in the cultural and creative industries is a growing economic sector.

Creative Industries Faculty currently comprises 9 discipline groupings: Acting, Film / Television and Technical Production; Communication and Media Design; Creative Writing and Cultural Studies; Dance; Fashion; Music and Sound; Performance Studies; Visual Arts. There are around 2000 students on campus in the Creative Industries Faculty and 200 staff. In 2004 Dance has approximately 170 full-time students on campus and a further 70 studying off campus and on-line courses. These figures include undergraduate and postgraduate as well as international students (8-10%). Dance employs 7.5 full time staff and up to 20 part-time staff.

2. Undergraduate courses in Creative Industries Dance

Creative Industries Dance provides training for career options in performance, choreography, teaching, administration, marketing, small business management, community, recreational and health projects, research and interdisciplinary projects and practice. As a recognised national leader in tertiary dance training, campus courses provide three specialist undergraduate degrees, an interdisciplinary degree and three post-graduate degrees. Seven external on-line courses provide professional development opportunities for dance teachers.

2.1. Common content areas

Whilst our three undergraduate on campus degrees are different there are fundamental subjects common to all. All students undertake training in classical and contemporary dance techniques which form the basis of our studio practice. Other studio techniques offered are jazz, tap, character, an introduction to culturally specific styles through World Dance, popular dance styles, pointe work, partnering (classical and contemporary). Permanent and guest teachers introduce diverse styles within these techniques. Underpinning this technical training are studies in
kinesiology, anatomy and somatic techniques such as Pilates and other alignment, centring and visualisation body therapies.

One of QUT Dance’s recognised strengths is the high quality of its training in choreography. The emphasis on nurturing creativity in students is a priority across the Faculty. Students not only have intensive time allocated to Choreographic Studies every year, but are encouraged to collaborate across disciplines and are trained in their final year in choreographic software packages to extend their knowledge in a virtual as well as a live environment.

Finally all students study the dance theory units of history, analysis and Australian dance, all of which include non-Western perspectives (including Asian and Australian indigenous) as fundamental to understanding global and local contexts. Professional studies such as management, portfolio preparation and performance psychology are introduced to build generic graduate capabilities. In addition, all degrees include Faculty wide units to give a context beyond an individual discipline and to develop interdisciplinary skills and understandings. These units include Introduction to the Creative Industries, Writing for Creative Industries, Cultures and Creativity, Narrative for the Creative Industries and Introduction to Multimedia.

2.2. Bachelor of Fine Arts (Dance) 3 years full time

performance on the world stage

A national and internationally competitive program, the BFA (Dance) offers limited places for those students wishing to become professional dancers and choreographers. Graduates, employed in companies and projects throughout Australia and overseas, are sought after for their technical standard, creativity and versatility. BFA students undertake the content described above but with studio practice taking priority. Central to the studio program are a series of Performance units in which established and emerging choreographers are commissioned to make new works. Students are showcased to the public and dance industry through a program of main-stage productions. This exposure to new work and innovative practice is further nurtured through student creative work. In their final year students choreograph and produce their own public season of works. Industry secondments, international exchanges, training in digital technologies, external and interdisciplinary collaborations as well as self-generated projects prepare students for ‘real world’ transitional experiences in their final year.

2.3. Bachelor of Creative Industries (Dance) 3 years full time

pathways, choice, diversity

Designed to prepare students for applied and/or creative dance career pursuits, BCI (Dance) offers flexibility and can be tailor-made to suit the interests of the student. Between one half to two thirds of the course can be taken in dance in a range of combinations. The remaining units, through a wide choice of electives or groups of electives, allow students to specialise in one or more areas from Creative Industries and/or across QUT Faculties. Pathways which students have chosen include combining dance with business for careers in arts management and marketing; dance and media including working with new technologies; dance and visual arts, drama or music; performance and choreography for community or corporate
settings; teaching in community settings and private studios; artists in schools projects; the leisure/health industries. Importantly, this is the degree from where our dance researchers and critics will emerge.

2.4. Bachelor of Creative Industries / Bachelor of Education (Dance)
4 years full time
*educating the next generation*

In Queensland schools, where dance is included at primary and secondary level, there is increasing demand for high school teachers majoring in dance. As a result, this double degree provides 100 percent employment. Offered in conjunction with the Faculty of Education, students train in the dance areas described in 2.1, augmented by teaching practice and project work based in schools as well as strong curriculum development. Students also train in a second teaching area and can choose from Drama, Music, Visual Arts, English, Film and Media Studies, Geography, History and Languages. The final two years focus on teacher preparation, equipping students with skills to become effective dance educators. This course, originally established to train Queensland high school dance teachers, has expanded to provide knowledge of other curriculum models within Australia and overseas. Specialist dance education staff provides support in this crucial dance training area.

3. Dance Research
*Investigate*

Dance research is supported at both discipline and Faculty level and is a small but growing area of the QUT dance program. CIRAC (Creative Industries Research and Application Centre) provides a dynamic environment for its 180 research students and is characterised by incentives for innovative research, flexible modes to support artists and educators continuing their professional careers, brokering industry partnerships and experienced and committed supervision. CIRAC is gaining a reputation for being a leader in creative practice as research. Areas of dance research strengths, both within CIRAC and within the dance post graduate program, are creative practice, intercultural and interdisciplinary performance, dance education, digital dance and application of new technologies.

3.1. Honours (1 year full-time), Master of Arts – Research (1 ½ -2 years full-time) Doctor of Philosophy (3 years full-time)

Study in these awards occur through CIRAC and involve one-on-one supervision by an expert in the field of inquiry. Students also form part of a wider research culture, which actively promotes an interchange of ideas across disciplines as well as research training through formal study of research methods, and regular conferences and seminars. The traditional mode of critical and theoretical inquiry results in a substantial thesis (30,000-50,000 words for an MA; 80,000-10,000 words for a PhD). Creative practice research includes artistic work accompanied by rigorous critical examination and contextualisation of the practice.
3.2. Master of Fine Arts (Dance) (18 months full-time)

This degree is delivered through the Dance discipline and provides advanced understanding and skills to enable graduates to contribute significantly to arts development and practice. It has been designed to cater for established or emerging dance artists who wish to explore their artistic practice through intensive studio-based research; in performance, choreography or interdisciplinary practice. A series of creative projects are supported by study of electives chosen for their relevance to the research proposal. The final work is accompanied by an exegesis.

3.3. Postgraduate dance teaching courses by external study

- Graduate Certificate of Creative Industries (Dance Teaching)
- Graduate Diploma of Creative Industries (Dance Teaching)
- Master of Creative Industries (Dance Teaching)

Dance teachers can upgrade their skills while continuing their professional practice with supportive on-line courses and intensive on-campus summer residencies. The course provides practical skills delivered in a flexible format for private studio teachers, freelance, recreational and school teachers, and dancers seeking a career transition. Content includes business administration, safedance practice, teaching methodologies, assessment procedures, stage and costume design, dance analysis and history, and reflective practice projects.

4. Support from within – training approaches

On campus, traditional training methods are being questioned in almost all areas of education and training as flexible delivery and on-line learning in virtual environments become increasingly common. Dance practice, which relies on embodied and often repetitive learning through direct transmission of information from teacher to student, does not always fit comfortably in this new environment. However, a mixture of new and traditional approaches at QUT Dance trialled over the last three years, have produced some positive outcomes.

4.1. The reflective practitioner

In adopting the motto of ‘the thinking dancer’ we have been proactive in merging theory with practice and emphasising crossovers between contextual studies and studio practice. Critical analysis has tended to remain in the academic domain. However, we have found that applying critical analysis skills in the studio does not slow down the pace of classes as was imagined. Rather, it can lead to more dynamic and focussed studio work and faster technical improvement.

For example, we have introduced a ‘buddy system’. When there are two or more groups undertaking an exercise in class each student will give constructive feedback to another student (their ‘buddy’ for that class) and vice versa. Of course, this assumes that students have been equipped with the language and observational skills to provide helpful technical and qualitative feedback. Through teacher in-service and working with a performance psychologist, we have adopted common terminology and teaching approaches across dance styles (whilst still valuing individual differences). This has helped us to provide a learning environment in the
studio where students can consciously, actively and effectively apply anatomical knowledge, reflective/motivational skills and theoretical understandings to their dancing. The result has been both improved learning outcomes and a greater valuing of theory by the students through their practice.

4.2 Intensive training program (ITP)

Many of the tools needed to ensure the effectiveness of the ‘thinking dancer’ strategy occur in the first month of first year student training. Students enter the course with different levels of previous training (up to 12 years) and with varying levels of previous injuries and alignment problems. In 2004 we piloted the ITP program which comprises an intensive month of training for core stability, postural alignment and aerobic fitness. Yoga, Pilates, ideokinesis and other somatic techniques were introduced. During these four weeks students do not undertake any formal dance classes. The program is designed to improve technique through breaking down habitual patterns of movement and posture that prevent ease of movement and therefore technical improvement. It also provides students with tools for self-diagnosis of technical faults and poor physical habits. Initial data analysis shows a drop in the first year injury rate and faster technical improvement, as well as more thoughtful and informed application of feedback in class through the introduction of diverse models of experiential learning.

The ITP program is followed up by the PASS program (Peak Achievement Skills and Strategies) comprising a physiotherapy diagnostic clinic which monitors correct implementation of remedial and strengthening exercises as well as diagnosing injuries. The physiotherapist works in close conjunction with 2 massage therapists, one of whom is also a nutritionist. The last two years has seen students become more aware of the importance of preventative treatment and body maintenance beyond the class room, in order to work efficiently and minimise injuries. A performance psychologist also undertakes motivational, visualisation, self-evaluation and other workshops to give students appropriate survival skills for the competitive environment which they will enter on graduation.

4.3. Student centred learning

Central to the training of artists and indeed any students is a stimulating and friendly environment where students can be nurtured individually and be given guidance from experienced and committed educators. In professional dance it is important that these educators have had a professional career in their area of expertise and maintain their national and international contacts and profile so that their teaching is relevant and current. Whilst teacher-centred studio classes and rehearsals, lectures and tutorials are still a significant part of tertiary dance training, adoption of student centred learning approaches at QUT are now priorities. An example of student-centred reflective practice amongst students has been described previously.

Increasingly group presentations through collaborative research of an area of study are becoming common learning and assessment tools. Apart from teaching students problem solving and team work, this type of assignment normally requires a presentation using some form of technology (for example, Power Point).
Since QUT is a university of technology all graduates are expected to acquire high level technology skills. All subjects have OLT (online teaching) sites and some components of theory units are delivered online with interactive tutorials and chat rooms. Training in multi-media, graphic and video software have become essential attributes for dance graduates who may find themselves working in project groups where management, marketing, documentation and computer skills become almost as important as their creative and performance skills. The ability to access online teaching services is also crucial for dance students who cannot always attend lectures and tutorials because of the demanding nature of their studio-based training.

4.4. Resources and infrastructure

Such contemporary training approaches require appropriate infrastructure. Whilst the need for spacious specialist dance studios has not changed, there is now the additional requirement for at least one studio to be able to take the load of aerial work and enable projection, as choreographic students ‘play’ with data projection in their choreographic explorations.

Digital cameras, choreographic software, internet access and even interactive sensors and devices are becoming a necessary element in planning for material resources for dance. Likewise our human resources are increasing as the versatility expected in performers, choreographers and teachers require greater numbers of specialist staff. As we train our students in dance to have high levels of multi-skilling so staff need ongoing training to teach additional skills.

At QUT we are fortunate to have a mainstage theatre and a small experimental theatre, in addition to a new Faculty building, Creative Industries Precinct, which houses the latest computer technologies for our disciplines. For the performing arts there is a ‘wired black box’ performance space in which surround sound, multiple data projection and interactive environments are easily accommodated. Fully equipped computer labs and lecture theatres allow students 24 hour, 7 days a week swipe card access. The new Creative Industries Precinct also houses ACID – an interactive design centre, as well as incubator businesses and start up companies, a professional theatre company, and the research centre CIRAC. This dynamic environment can provide research and work opportunities for entrepreneurial dance graduates.

5. Looking out – ‘real world’ experiences

Nevertheless, fundamental values crucial to dance and dance educators do not lie in the resources provided but rather in the desire to communicate our art form to as many as possible, to make connections and to work in diverse environments. In terms of training our students we therefore need to take them out of the studio, the on campus theatre, lecture hall or away from their computer labs to provide what educational theorists call ‘authentic learning tasks’.

At QUT this is provided by workplace learning opportunities such as secondments with dance companies, participation in community or professional projects, devising and producing one’s own collaborative projects, assisting with administration or
marketing in arts organisations. Partnerships with the dance industry and training institutions are crucial to network, share ideas and approaches and set up collaborations and exchanges. Normally these opportunities are provided in the final year of study.

Dance has always had an international focus and now more so than ever before. In order to work effectively in a global environment, QUT Creative Industries Dance delivers a culturally inclusive, internationalised curriculum which introduces philosophies and world views beyond those of the West and encourages intercultural projects. This perspective has attracted high calibre international students who actively contribute to our diverse programs, and help students build an international professional network. Valuing the diverse cultures of these students who form a vibrant part of our population is not just an important way to welcome them, but also a learning imperative for all staff and students. In turn we need to care for these students whilst they are with us. QUT is well known for its support systems to assist students with accommodation, transport, health issues and adjusting to an Australian way of life. QUT International College is renowned for its excellent English and bridging programs including ongoing support for international students’ learning needs.

In internationalising the curriculum, ‘teaching about’ an area of knowledge in culturally inclusive programs is more effective if it is accompanied by ‘experience in’ the environment itself. Since 1995 Dance has undertaken tours to present our work to several countries (South Africa, Hong Kong, Macao, Philippines, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan). Whilst a showcase tour is a valuable experience it is not the same as immersing oneself in the culture through collaborative projects. It has therefore been our policy for the last 4 years to undertake two way exchanges where students from both countries participate in a collaborative creative process and performance season in each country. In this way students learn to adapt to and respect cultural differences in both countries and to share each other’s cultural understandings in artistic, education and social settings.

I hope that new collaborative projects will emerge as a result of us coming together here in Beijing. In conclusion, I would like to sincerely thank the Beijing Dance Academy for the opportunity to share our vision and program to colleagues in China and beyond. Perhaps, even more importantly is a commitment for all of us to continue to share our experiences in dance education so that we may celebrate our differences, work on pedagogical improvements together and keep communicating our ideas to build a strong network of performance, education and research partners. I suggest that the reason for doing so is to strengthen the presence and relevance of dance in all our countries.