Mary Jane Mahony thought her postgraduate qualifications in Botany specialising in cell biology would lead naturally into a career as a bench scientist. It didn’t. The change in direction was confirmed when she was offered a post in Malaysia at the University of Agriculture, teaching science. Reflecting back on the time, she says “I was an untrained teacher and I am embarrassed to say that I taught in the way I was taught. My interest in the use of audiovisual materials started there too”. Her new career-long interest in the education of adults was struck with a position at the then Tasmanian College of Advanced Education working as an editor in a Distance Education Unit. “At the time, distance education was driven largely by access issues and supporting those returning to study. After teaching high school students for two years following completion of a UNE Diploma in Education, I realised that my skills were more suited to supporting mature learners rather than young people”. From Tasmania, Mary Jane moved to what was then called the Orange Agriculture College, and more recently the Faculty of Rural Management – her primary role was in distance education and instructional design but situated within a framework of discipline expertise. She later took on several roles, one of which was the Head of Postgraduate and Professional Studies which developed her profile across the university more broadly and enabled her to better understand the complex nature of change in universities and how best to work within it. With a PhD from the University of Wollongong in a policy systems study of distance education in Australia, a central theme in Mary Jane’s work is in working out how change happens to support student learning. She says, “I realised that change in education often has little to do with teaching and learning theory and more to do with two things: institutional and national policy; and individuals themselves and where they want to go. So my work has been to contribute significantly into policy and procedure development with a knowledge of individuals at the grassroots, and the complexity of systems. I suppose you could say that my work is trying to work out where to tap on the system”.

Now working in a number of different roles across the university, one as the Director of Education Connections in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and another as Chair of the College of Health Science’s e-Learning Working Group, Mary Jane has been in thick of working towards developing systems, mechanisms and policies that enhance university learning and teaching primarily through flexible approaches. These are often, though not always, underpinned by information and communication technologies, but always underpinned by a philosophy of learner-centredness. She brings to each role, a long institutional history and commitment to building collaborative networks. In fact, this is the pleasurable part of Mary Jane’s work. “One of the benefits of my work is being able to create opportunities where colleagues discover that they have something to give each other and get excited about it. Fostering collaborative learning always gives me a buzz because I don’t feel like I have to deliver knowledge. Instead, I facilitate people to share their work so that they learn from each other. I see this happening more and more in my College role with knowledge sharing of e-Learning across the five faculties. This is an enormous challenge since there are staff (and students) on four campuses as well as located in the University’s teaching hospitals. There is, though a real commonality of purpose”. As Mary Jane identifies too, much of this coordination is supported by developing a strategic approach to working towards change, managing it, and then translating it for application in different contexts. “My work can range from discussions at the chalkface to senior management. I like to think of it as producing an understandable and informed way of moving forward. Learning is the core – e-learning strategies are a current focus.” This work also manifests broadly within the Faculty’s responsibility. One role in that context, for example, is to encourage more research into learning and teaching. It is about raising the status of pedagogical research and “turning what academics have to do anyway into scholarly outcomes. This could be about encouraging them to collect evidence and to develop a process of rigour about it but also communicating that work to others as a form of scholarship”.

Mary Jane thinks of e-Learning as a driver that encourages people to think about their teaching - “an excuse”, as she puts it. The challenge as she sees it, is how to “recognise and reward” academics’ efforts at change. “There is increasing pressure to do more with less, and perceived conflicts between teaching and research responsibilities, both leading to considerable stress on our excellent teachers. We need somehow to get beyond that dichotomy, and to nurture and reward colleagues who meet that challenge.” The landscape for talking about technology, particularly e-Learning, is changing. Mary Jane argues that while there will always those “early adopters” and “innovators” of e-Learning, the focus must be on enabling the majority of university teachers to make informed decisions about taking-up established technologies to support student learning. “Change is always evolutionary and incremental. We need to have a twin focus: getting more colleagues to use technologies to facilitate active learning by students in integrated ways while supporting early adopters to use it with increasing pedagogical sophistication.” The issue as she rightly notes is in finding ways of rewarding the take-up of other peoples’ ideas.

As a long time user of these technologies, Mary Jane describes herself as having “played with these toys” for a very long time”. In fact, she has had an email address since 1986. But aside from the onslaught of potentially exciting new technologies and how they might support university learning and teaching in ways that foreground flexibility, effectiveness and efficiency; one debate that Mary Jane feels is lacking is “how does the purpose of the university itself. While she is clearly excited by new discourses around graduate attributes as providing an avenue for that discussion, she worries that “there appears to be an absence of debate” on that broader question. “Being clearer about the purpose of the university in our 21st century society”, she says, “could help us all be clearer about our roles within the university.”

For further conversation with Mary Jane about her e-Learning work in the College of Health Sciences, or in the Faculty of Health Sciences, or about learning and teaching more generally, visit the online discussion forum at: www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/forum or contact her via email at: MJ.Mahony@fhs.usyd.edu.au