Jane Gavan has a long history of participating in different kinds of visual arts practices. She began as a print-maker, and then came a degree in Fine Arts and another in Visual Arts studying her specialist area Glass. She managed an art glass and specialist crystal store, completed postgraduate study in curatorial management, dabbled in retail, got into photography, won prizes for her beading work and then started her own hand printed tile business. One of her research projects – The Pink Project (fluorescent pink objects and art works) was featured in May this year on ABC1's The Collectors. Since 2003, Jane's research has been pushing boundaries – she draws on a constructivist interdisciplinary approach to create new knowledge about the use of glass and colorants and their potential applications. Her thinking and practice is located at the interface of several disciplines: visual art, design, technological history and science. Alongside her art practice, Jane is Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) at the Sydney College of Arts (SCA) – an institutional role she has held since the beginning of 2007.

The flexible and eclectic route in and out of work is, according to Jane, typical of the career cycle of a practising visual artist. “Most people in my field can have up to six income streams in one year. That's what I tell my students now. And I have been a model of that, in a way.” Jane’s attention to the student learning experience is what marks her work as Associate Dean. She developed an interest in teaching and learning fairly early in her academic career following a 3-day program in tertiary education at the University of NSW. Following her participation in that program, she then completely redesigned a subject called Studio Theory for glass students. “That subject was sort of running aground without any direction and I wrote a program just off my own bat after this 3-day workshop and presented it to the coordinator of the unit. I said ‘I'll deliver this 13 week program for you, here's my curriculum, here's what students need to learn and this is the way I'm going to do it’. That's when the SCA took me on for 18 months. That was probably the first time I experienced constructing a learning environment and using everything to hand, including myself, the students, the material, the space, the technology – to really think about teaching and learning.”

In Jane’s own teaching, she is still experimenting and innovating. “I ask my students how they want to be assessed for a certain project or I might say: here is the range of options. You can have my mark, my mark and your mark, or everybody else's mark. I get the students to write down how they'd like to be assessed and we talk about the experience of it afterwards. And students reveal some very surprising things. Last week I did this with students in Glass and they came up with a perfectly good and respectable model so we did it that way.”

While much of this negotiation and flexibility seems characteristic of the culture of Art Schools, and is embedded in the creativity of art-making, the amalgamation of the SCA with the University of Sydney in the early 1990s continues to be challenging for enhancing teaching and learning. Jane recognises this. “My experience as Associate Dean is that a lot of staff are still trying to get their head around being in a university rather than an Art School. Historically, Art Schools have always been a hotbed of some very radical and creative thinking. I think there is a perception that some of that creativity has been challenged in the move to being part of a university – and especially, that compliance with university rules and policies on teaching and learning feel like an imposition. This can lead to some very difficult discussions. As the teaching and learning portfolio gets bigger and bigger, policy tends to double in number – there's a lot to wade through for a single academic. At the moment, a large part of this job has

Profile: Jane Gavan
Sydney College of the Arts

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changed. It’s becoming more policy and quality assurance oriented whereas I’m really interested in the hands-on stuff – supporting people and thinking about the deal that students are getting. One of the challenges of the role is a perception of it being overly bureaucratic. But sometimes staff do ask for specific things. For example, some have asked for a unit of study development workshop. And we had a very good teaching development day recently which was a good start”.

Despite her changing role and the inevitable institutional politics that accompany academic change, working to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the SCA is important for Jane because of her concern for students. “It’s actually the students that make me keep worrying about it. That’s the key. Putting students in the middle means that you want to give them the best possible experience for their development as artists.”

Alongside Jane’s focus on student learning, the SCA has been participating in a number of new teaching and learning initiatives. They are one of the pilot faculties for the university’s Balance Scorecard process. Jane elaborates: “we’ve been working with the Strategic Planning Office on a massive strategic planning exercise. They’ve been helping us to map and match our strategic objectives, with a set of initiatives, a set of measures and then to look at the resourcing. What’s great about involving the SCA in the process is that it’s helping us with a coherent approach to strategic planning which is something I’ve not been involved in before. It also provides the faculty with a set of documents that can carry the work forward in a consistent rather haphazard way. Instead of rehashing the plans we had, it was an opportunity to really look at the scales on the Course Experience Questionnaire and look at where we could improve. The planning process is now more consistently aligned to the student feedback system and the resources that we have. With the right team, the right energy, the right governance and leadership, the document will be really useful. It has taken us about six months to do and get agreement on.”

It appears that revisiting the strategic planning process faculty-wide has also generated some positive spin-offs for students too. “We started looking at the sort of students that are coming to our College and organised a whole range of new initiatives. In terms of teaching and learning, this has meant we’re trying to prepare students before they arrive as much as we can. We’re doing portfolio workshops with them, helping them to understand what they’re likely to experience when they get here. Some of the Open Day Talks are much more about generic and graduate attributes than they were before. We send lecturers out into schools; we have artist-in-residency programs so that our students are getting professional development that way as well. As a consequence, we saw a considerable rise in the UAI – and a huge rise in the number of first preferences – which is great.”

The other major initiative is a curriculum review of the Bachelor of Visual Arts (BVA) degree. Jane says: “the BVA is our one and only undergraduate degree and it has been enormously successful but we need more information about students’ experiences of learning and the teaching and curriculum across the board. We need to start to document the things we do well so we can share them with the world. It’s unusual for these practices to be documented and writing it down means that our learning through it becomes a rare resource for visual arts education. I don’t see why we can’t be a centre for learning and teaching excellence in visual arts. Nobody’s really tried to make that their niche before and I think there is a place for the SCA to do just that.”

Jane’s ambitions for rewarding excellent teaching and learning at the SCA are also high on the agenda. Following the completion of the BVA curriculum review, she is planning to pilot a system of teaching excellence awards at the College – a mechanism intended to recognise the scholarly and research-led teaching that is so much a part of arts-based learning.

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