

Serendipity and science communication

AWIS member Diane Dinnis describes how she got involved in science communication and became project manager for the Biotechnology Learning Hub.

One day in the lab - whilst repeating the same experiment for the third time that week - I realised that I would like to try something new. It dawned on me that the highlights of my post-doctoral work were teaching and communicating science to others. At the time I was managing a bioprocess engineering lab at the University of Queensland. From that moment on I devoted more time to my science writing and presentation (and that of my colleagues!). I attended local science communicators meetings and constantly asked the same question of people “How did you get into science communication?” The answer often seemed to include a mix of persistence, passion and “being in the right place at the right time”.

I returned to New Zealand in 2005 and knew it was the right time to pursue my dream to explore science communication. I had persistence, the desire to make a change and a passion for writing. However, it was my partner’s serendipitous seating next to Professor Alister Jones on a long-haul flight that began my career change.

Alister was from the University of Waikato’s School of Education, and a Councillor at the Royal Society of New Zealand. Subsequently, he drew my attention to a job working as a Research Assessor for the Marsden Fund. The Marsden fund supports research excellence in science, technology, engineering and maths, social sciences and the humanities. I worked there for 6-months to cover for a staff member on maternity leave. It was a fantastic opportunity to immerse myself in some of the best

research projects in the country and work as part of small, efficient, and friendly team. This role was an important stepping-stone for me – out of the lab and into a whole new work environment.

Recently, I became project manager for the New Zealand Biotechnology Learning Hub (www.biotechlearn.org.nz). The Hub is an initiative of the Ministry of Research Science and Technology and aims to strengthen links between the biotechnology industry and the classroom.



Diane on New Brighton beach in Christchurch with her dog Gabe (a Rhodesian Ridgeback)

The Hub team provides science and technology teachers with up-to-date examples of New Zealand biotechnology and teaching resources.

The University of Waikato manages the Hub, although I work from home in Christchurch. Working from home has advantages and disadvantages. Overall, I find it a productive work environment, with the added bonus of having the beach close-by when a breath of fresh air is needed.

I enjoy the diversity of my new role. So far I have been involved with developing two ‘focus stories’ for the Hub. One looking at ‘Future foods’ with Crop and Food Research and another called ‘Honey to heal’ with Comvita. A typical day for me can involve writing and editing articles; talking to researchers and teachers; and helping to develop multimedia resources for the website, such as interactives, video clips, and video conferences.

Everyday I learn more about science and the applications of biotechnology in New Zealand. The site has grown beyond original expectations and is proving a popular resource. We are currently re-organising the content and will ‘re-launch’ a new look Hub later this year, with an emphasis on easy navigation and connections between content. I can’t wait!