Janet Maher interviewed by Prue Gill

PG: Janet. I wonder if you can tell me how you became involved with the development of the first VCE English Study Design, and/or its implementation. What sort of experiences and perspectives did you bring to that discussion in the early '90s?

JM: Well, I think that the advantage for me was that I was employed at PLC in the English department in the '80s and I started on the same day as people such as Jennifer Haynes and Ilana Snyder and Pam Chessell: we were the four new people in the English department, all of whom, except me, were very experienced in curriculum development and that sort of thing. And, Jennifer encouraged us during those years of the late '80s when the Study Design was being developed, to participate actively in VATE as individual members and not just the school members going along to conferences and things and to be part of committees and all that sort of thing. And, her involvement spread to the rest of the department in that way.

PG: Was she Head of department at that time?

JM: She started as Head of English the same day that I started at the school. I think – well, we represented probably a third of the English teachers at Years 11 and 12, so we had a fair influence. Jennifer came from a background, I think, that she had taught other sorts of English courses and that was the big difference. I had only taught HSC English…

PG: I didn't know that about Jennifer.

JM: Well, she came from Rusden so that she had been – and before that she came from South Australia and they had different sorts of English courses, and in Rusden she was obviously training teachers to teach in the whole variety of English courses that they had in the state at that time. But, I wasn't actually really aware of their existence because the only teaching I'd done in secondary school was at the HSC level for English and Literature. And, Jennifer encouraged us – well, there were two things that were very helpful for the development of the VCE and the way it was developed and the Study Design. She introduced a model to the Year 12 teachers of assessing the option that we've done in the Group 1 Writer's workshop or Writing workshop; I never know which one it was called at that stage. She introduced a model of assessment of that which was very like what the verification model was when it was set up; and the other thing that she introduced was that she encouraged us to take up the Group 1 Oral Communication option. I don't know whether you're familiar with the Oral option? The moderation for the Writing workshop system assessment that she introduced and so we'd been doing that for a number of years before we actually came into the VCE, and the introduction of the oral option into the school which was quite a fine thing; it acknowledged other strengths in students, and it was also the group work project-based group assessment, all that sort of thing, that became part of the Communication Project. It was very similar in a number of ways.

PG: But that was under the umbrella of the HSC.

JM: This was still under that, and it was part of the – they weren't called study designs in those days…

PG: Curriculum.

JM: Curriculum, I think it was, it outlined the various options that you could do. There were others, I know, but we only offered the Writing workshop and the Oral Communication options, and certainly I think that that was a good starting point for when the Study Design was developing. And, as the Study Design was developing, Jennifer was quite active in it anyway and in 1988 she went off to VCAB on secondment for the year and I took over as Head of English, but what she was working on at VCAB was this sort of thing, and we were asked for input and to respond to various things and what have you, so there was quite a bit of early exposure to the Study Design; it wasn't new to us when it hit.

PG: And, what was your attitude to the idea of a common study? Was it embraced at PLC?

JM: Um, yes. There were probably a number of people who felt that standards might slip, you know! And, I think that – this is leaping ahead to other questions that come later on, but it seems to me that the assessment tail wagged the dog, which tended to go right down the school everywhere, not just where I was teaching. But, if this was the sort of thing that was assessed at Year 12 level, this was the sort of thing that was taught at Year 8, you know? Those sorts of things. So, the development of – I think that we had been exposed to the idea that group projects, oral projects, all those sorts, the full reading, writing, speaking, listening breadth of the curriculum, that we could actually introduce it wherever lower down so it wasn't just that rigid teacher-directed classroom, and we also taught only the one course anyway. We taught only HSC, so we were used to a single course in the school. It wasn't as if we were the sort of school that offered Group 1 and Group 2, and had students going along to vocational pathways or anything like that.

PG: And did that worry you, the fact that you were now going to be teaching a common course that TAFE students were going to do and community health programs were going to do?

JM: No, it didn't, because I think it was pretty well sold to us, or maybe a lot of the professional development was around the idea that the Study Design was uniform, but the way you interpreted it could be at whatever level or whatever interests that your particular students had, and just because we didn't have the full range of students didn't mean that the Study Design wouldn't cater for them.

PG: Yeah, and so you did feel that the Study Design catered – you could cater for a big range of students within that single design?

JM: Yes. And also, I think that the whole notion of satisfactory completion without assessment was new to a lot of people, but it seemed to me quite logical. Not that the assessment was done away with altogether, but it just meant that you could say that people had completed the requirements for the certificate.

PG: And that seemed to be a problem for quite a number of private schools, I think.

JM: It was, yes.

PG: But, not at PLC?

JM: There was probably a bit of rumbling, and maybe a bit of rumbling amongst the parents, because, you know, there was a lot of stuff in the newspaper in those days about things, and of course there was the whole sudden interest in the International Baccalaureate, which the school did eventually adopt.

PG: Fairly early on, didn't you?

JM: Well, in 1990 I remember going to Adelaide to a conference about introducing it, the IB and – you know, talking about looking at the Study Design and how inclusive it was and that the framework that it gave for the study which didn't exactly dictate things. The IB English course or broader literature or whatever, was a list of books. There wasn't anything about aims, objectives, pedagogy, approaches, methodology; nothing like that at all. But, I think that in the next few years the IB people very quickly realised that there was quite an interest in Victoria – it wasn't actually taken up as hugely as some people might think; there was only a very limited number of schools that teach it, but they saw that there was a lot of interest in it in Victoria and they also saw that there had been a lot of curriculum development in Victoria, so they employed a number of people like Helen Drennan (future Principal of Wesley College) who went over to Cardiff and shot out the curriculum. So, instead of just being a list of books that was assessed by Professor somebody or other in Europe who didn't have to account for any

of the assessment to anybody in terms of record-keeping or criteria for assessment and that sort of thing, they suddenly became very much more…

PG: Quite interesting. Do you think the IB was at all influenced by the VCE development?

JM: I think it was, because you see, the people who were used to curriculum development did things there. I know a number of the PLC people who actually taught it in the early years; I'd moved on by then by the time it was introduced. A number of people who taught it actually had quite an active input into Cardiff.

PG: So, in a way you've sort of already moved onto that second question, which was thinking about a common study and how that could cater for a wide range of things. Was there anything else you want to say about what drove that development and what the pros and cons of that development were?

JM: Well, the common study – the way in which the Study Design was actually laid out and the way in which the units were developed and just the general structure of the course and some of the background to it that was there in the Study Design or the objectives of the course, I think it actually enabled people to develop a course within a framework that suited particularly their class, and English, for instance, still had a list of books for assessment, so you know…

PG: Much longer list at that time.

JM: I know! I was on the exam setting panel for a couple of years, and everybody else sat down and did their paper very quickly, but we used to take – you know, even doing four books a week, and the time to read four books a week when you're teaching fulltime is hard to find. But, yes, so there was some sort of framework for the assessment, but there was also much more latitude at Year 11, I think, in terms of the school's own choice as opposed to the Year 12 where you chose from a particular – well, we'd been used to themes and issues but you know, that sort of development enabled you to do it further down the school as well.

PG: Well, you were just commenting before about that, the way it trickled down, the teaching or the demands of the VCE trickled right down the school. Was that more so with the VCE than with HSC in your experience?

JM: Well, I think it did trickle down because other things could now be assessed, and I think that assessment tended to influence what was being taught lower down the school. If you had to write essays on novels, you wrote essays on novels all the way through, and if you had to do something of a writing workshop, you did a writing folio every time. And, I think that the fact that such things as the Communication Project and issues were being assessed enabled you to be much freer lower down.

PG: And, a big emphasis on creative writing and on oral.

JM: Yes, so that it wasn't just the more transactional writing.

PG: In fact, that was probably a bit of a trickle up, wasn't it?

JM: Yes, yes, because it was the things that you wanted to do lower down were actually being valued.

PG: Ok. So, thinking about the development of the first VCE Study Design and the piloting of that, how would you describe the role of the teaching profession in that? Did that introduce a new role for classroom teachers across the state, do you think?

JM: I think that it – one of the things that it did for teachers was they had to become more cooperative; there was no way you could exist in isolation and be just one of, say, ten teachers at Year 11 who just assessed all your own work and didn't do any moderation, that sort of thing. There was no way that you could actually isolate yourself and teach a course that was different from everybody else; you still had to fulfil the criteria that were expected of you. So, that was one way in which it was affected.

PG: In your experience did that unsettle teachers, the fact that they were now more accountable to a team?

JM: It wasn't until I was involved in going out to other schools in the verification process that I realised that for some schools it really was a major impediment. In some schools, for instance, it was the head of department who was a maverick in that sense, and the rest of the department asked me to come in to sort this out, so it was actually more evident, I think, in some schools than others, and I think by being at PLC and with Jennifer having been in charge we were exposed to it, and it was really just the development of what we were doing.

PG: And do you think there was the alternative effect too, that it actually enhanced the professionalism of teachers?

JM: Teachers became much more interested in professional development and I suppose they became much more exposed to theoretical matters as well. It wasn't just a case of teaching the book and getting them to write an essay; it was a case of how are we going to approach this book, that sort of thing. There was much more theory and practice combined.

PG: That's right, and I remember VATE being involved in the development of things like critical literacy professional development that went for weeks and weeks and weeks.

JM: Yes, and there was a huge uptake in that sort of thing, and at VATE conferences those particular sessions that were devoted to developing aspects that suited the teaching of the VCE were very popular.

PG: So, was it different – let's say once you had the Study Design and you took the Study Design into the school, how was the course developed within the school, and was that a different process that with the HSC, for example? Was it just that you were working more now as a team, or …

JM: Well, we had been working as a team. I think it was just a case of shifting our focus towards working out what was satisfactory completion and what were various levels of assessment and that sort of thing as opposed to – you see, I think even with the old course design we were still developing courses and we were always cooperative. For instance, if you had four texts a couple of people would prepare the texts, would prepare Shakespeare for everybody. I mean, you did have to prepare it for yourself but they would prepare worksheets and a list of readings and assessment tasks and that sort of thing, so there always was that sort of cooperation.

PG: And that happened under the HSC?

JM: Yes, so for us it was really just a transfer. And, I must say that it was really – I got to be very grateful to William Mackay, the Principal, that he allowed us to participate in the pilot, and we actually had two state verification chairs at the school; one in Australian Studies and one in me after the pilot, so it meant that he had to give more time to us for professional development. I had to have more time to do these things and it didn't seem to worry him at all that I was off all over the state and doing things. He regarded it as being something that was…

PG: Good for the school.

JM: Good for the school and good for the professional development of the staff, and the fact that it was English, Australian studies and Maths meant that a) it covered quite a lot of the school to be involved in it, and b) we were all very different sorts of departments; it was a real shock for Maths to have to…

PG: So, Janet let's just return to the difference between an HSC syllabus and a VCE study design in terms of what it meant developmentally at a school or department level.

JM: I think that the HSC syllabus more or less had the course there for you, and you followed it and there was a range of other courses that you could take but they were all different. The Study Design was all the one document and teachers had to develop it, develop their course from the Study Design but it could be very different in one school from another and still meet the requirements of the course, and also it could mean in a particular school if you had a class or a group that was perhaps not wishing to go on to the academic side of things or maybe not even wishing to sit the exams, you could actually devise quite a different sort of course for them and still achieve satisfactory completion.

PG: And, did you have any students at PLC who chose not to sit exams?

JM: No, I think everybody did. And also, I mean we were in a pretty privileged position, really. Everybody got a satisfactory completion. There'd be somebody standing over them until they finished; if it wasn't a staff member it'd be a parent and there was that sort of expectation. As there are in all the schools there are a couple of people that don't make it for the year for whatever reason; something distressing happens in their life and they drop out, but on the whole students completed the course.

PG: Well, thinking about your more global perspective once you became a state chairperson and you moved beyond the piloting, have you got any comments to make about how well you think that study design worked for a range of students?

JM: Well, we were talking earlier about the fact that some people and some schools felt that it didn't have the academic rigour – that was the phrase – that it should have, so I think we've probably covered that. But, I also noticed that from those who taught in other sorts of schools there was some resentment that the academic side was taking over. So, it was really both ends of the spectrum that were having trouble with the notion of the one size fits all. Well, it wasn't one size fits all, but one template of a course that would actually…

PG: And, in your experience, were the Oral CAT or the Communication Project thought of as less academic aspects of the course?

JM: Yes, and I think there was evidence of some – and of course, because that was totally internally assessed being Year 11 level, I think there were a number of schools that skipped over that, just did it very much a lip service to that work requirement.

PG: It's ever been thus, hasn't it, that if it's not going to be assessed then …

JM: You don't do it, that's right. But, a number of schools saw it as just developing a student's confidence, their teamwork, all these sorts of things that would stand them in good stead regardless of whether they were helpful to you in that three hours of the examination period.

PG: Actually, we haven't really commented much on the fact that it's a two-year certificate now and what impact that had on the school experience.

JM: For the introduction of it, it was probably just as well it was a two-year experience because it gave schools the opportunity to get used to the idea of work requirements and satisfactory completion and

assessment criteria and those sorts of things before they actually landed into it at Year 12, but yes, it is a two-year certificate whereas the last one was just a single year.

PG: Any comments about the Writing folio? We might talk about that a little later, I suppose, but…

JM: Yes, I'll probably have more comment about it when it comes to assessment.

PG: Yes. But, it was an interesting teaching experience for many people, the Writing folio.

JM: And, I thought that the whole verification experience for teachers was very interesting, to be in a panel with other schools and look at their work and think, 'Hmm, little Susie isn't as bad as I thought she was' or whatever.

PG: Yes. Just going back to the earlier global perspective, overall do you think that that Study Design did achieve its aim of catering for a range of students? Do you think that that was a successful experiment of Jean Blackburn's?

JM: I thought it did but not in all cases, and I think a lot of that might have been to do with the approach to the Study Design of individual schools or individual teachers, but there was plenty of support going around for people who were finding it challenging. But even so, I think that the Study Design did allow that flexibility and to cater for all, but as I said before, at both ends of the spectrum there were people who didn't want to give up their tried and tested…

PG: Say something about the support.

JM: Well, I mentioned before the VATE conferences and things like that, and I imagine they went on in all other conferences as well.

PG: Across the other studies?

JM: Yes, the other studies. So, there were all of those sorts of things. The materials that came out to the schools I think were very supportive. The fact that there were people to ask; if you were on a panel and you had a panel chair who had a regional chair who had me, that sort of thing. There was plenty of people to consult about things, but that sort of got shot down in flames.

PG: And even quite a strong team in VCAB as it was then …

JM: Yes, yes.

PG: …who were accessible to the teaching departments.

JM: Yes, exactly.

PG: I don't know how that was under the HSC because that was not my experience. I was working under TOP.

JM: Because the course had been around for quite a while people didn't call on it necessarily, but there may well have been much more support available for teachers.

PG: So, thinking about the early implementation, what sort of implications were there for the pedagogy of the teaching of English? Did an HSC teacher have to really think afresh about their practice?

JM: Yes, I think that they had to – we were talking about the nature of some of the tasks that were now required, things like the Communication Project. Many people had probably not done writing folios as well as you might want them to in the past. Certainly, the idea of group work focus, cooperating with other teachers, assessing with other teachers, all of those sorts of things had to be adapted. If it wasn't in their particular makeup to teach that way some of them had a number of challenges. The sort of teacher who stands up in front of the class and really guides the students through their own thinking all the time, 'This is what this means. That's the correct way to say this.' All that sort of thing, that sort of more cut and dried sort of teaching had to be adapted considerably. I think they had to be much more listening to the students, much more allowing the students to develop their own project, much more guidance that they had to provide rather than actually distributing the information.

PG: And, I'll just say there, which in my experience, that growth was positive across the team that I worked with.

JM: But I think also it probably suits English teachers. Probably English was one of the better-suited subjects to this new VCE approach. I think that some of the other disciplines had a harder time.

PG: We haven't commented on the idea of English being the one common study across the whole – you know, everyone had to do it. Now we no longer have a single common study.

JM: Right. If you did – I mean Literature was still under the English banner, but if you did the Literature course you still had to do the English as well.

PG: Yes. Implications of that?

JM: Certainly. I was involved in the development of the English Language course and setting the papers for that in its early stages, and the fact that it was a course that had to be done in addition to English meant that lots of schools of course didn't introduce it early on, whereas now schools offer more than one English and whichever one you might want to do will suffice, although a number of people I think still do two.

PG: Pros and cons of having a compulsory study?

JM: Well, I've always had a bit of two minds about that, because I think Victoria was the only state that had a common study or compulsory English, wasn't it? Did anybody else have compulsory English at Year 12 level? I thought that it was sort of almost a bit like the English A levels that you chose what you were best at, and by the time you got to Year 12 you could do Physics, Maths and Chemistry and leave it at that.

PG: I don't know if Victoria was the only one. I certainly know that there were states where it was not compulsory.

JM: Hmm, and certainly the fact that you had to count it in to your score was another problem.

PG: Do you think that it had any impact on the student body, the fact that they were all having a common experience in their Year 12?

JM: I think that it probably had less impact on the students than you would think because they hadn't been through it before. It wasn't the case that things had changed for them. I think that in the early years there might have been a certain feeling of being guinea pigs. We certainly had to work very hard with convincing the parents and the school that being involved in the pilot was a good thing for the students.

PG: So, when the common study was lost and students had a choice, do you think that there was any teaching and learning lost in that experience?

JM: I think that a lot of it had gone before that, anyway. I think that the method of assessment was so tightly bound into the course and was also such a great professional development and when that went I think you lost a lot of the common nature of things.

PG: Well, I really…

JM: People were only really interested in what was being assessed.

PG: I really, really would love to talk about that a little bit further now, you know? The changes over those early years of the VCE and what you think were the marked changes and how did they come about in your memory.

JM: Well, obviously verification as a means of assessment was extremely expensive, but it was very professionally developing, and I think that some schools might only admit that grudgingly but the idea of being with a group of ten schools who could be reasonably similar, could be quite different, but seeing a range of students' work, working out what was your top, middle and bottom, what you'd give them etcetera, and then checking that the regions were all doing the same thing and that at the top level that you could say that the mark given there was much the same as the mark given somewhere else, I think that that was extremely professionally developing and it went back to that moderation idea. I think there were two subjects that really missed out when verification went. English, because we had always had that moderation of the Writing workshop idea that folios would be moderated. Geography, with its consensus moderation on projects; they lost out too. They were as disappointed when that went. But, I think that possibly the powers that devised assessment in other studies hadn't thought it through sufficiently, because I would say that there are lots of subjects that moderation doesn't work for. Any form of consensus, you know; you're right or you're wrong. You didn't really need moderation in Maths or languages.

PG: No, no, there you were assessing a process, as distinct from an outcome.

JM: But the Maths people would tend to suggest that if you didn't have the process right you couldn't get the outcome, so there's no need to actually assess the process. And, a lot of other disciplines didn't have the vocabulary to talk about it, and I feel that it got to the stage where some of the criteria in other subjects were listing what had to be included, and you'd get something like – in Legal Studies or whatever, that a student would have done a piece of work, the teacher would go and tick it off, that one's missing, a checklist. You know, that sort of thing, a checklist of stuff, and then the idea that if it was all there you got a perfect mark, whether it was a case of the teacher having done 493 drafts with this student, whereas I think English teachers knew when to stop having input into the draft.

PG: How?

JM: Just years of experience, I think, wasn't it, and that feeling of knowing when the work was becoming yours not theirs, that sort of thing. Whereas in a lot of subjects the pressure to give everybody an A because all it needed was to fulfil the criteria and the criteria was a shopping list, so I think that that method of assessment didn't suit all studies.

PG: Going back to English, thinking about your role as verification chairperson, what were the most challenging things about that, and what were the most fulfilling? That's what I'm hoping to talk about.

JM: Well, some of the challenging things were – and actually I've enjoyed them as well – was being asked to go to various schools to help them with their approaches to things, and I'm sure that most

panel chairs and regional chairs would have found it as rewarding in that line. Also, speaking to – I remember right at the start going to Carlton football ground to speak to English teachers, and I had all these English teachers and I looked over and there was the John Elliott Stand over there and I thought, 'Hmm, I'm not sure whether this is me or not.' So, there were personal challenges that way in terms of my own professional development, but certainly I learnt an incredible lot and watching – I think schools can become a bit insular and when you're given somebody else's material from another school you get great ideas about the topic that they set or the approach that they took or whatever, and also just in terms of developing your own ability to apply the criteria. That was all very rewarding in that way. And, I think that the professional development side of it was the thing that was best for English teachers, but I still remember Sam Ball saying – I think it was the Board of Studies (VBOS) by this time – that 'The Board of Studies is not into providing professional development; it's into controlling assessment.' And so, that's when it all went out and on reflection I think that a lot of it was that it hadn't been well-thought through in other subjects so that it sort of did English in, in that way.

PG: That's an interesting comment. I certainly remember Alma Ryrie-Jones saying that she believed the greatest professional development was having a discussion around a piece of work.

JM: Well, that's the interesting thing on that tape I gave you, *VCE: A Fair Measure*. There's a rather disappointing section – I don't know which the school is, but they're actually demonstrating, talking about a piece of work and they're saying things like, 'Well, the criteria says there must be some analysis of language used. Well, there is some analysis of language used but there could be more' and I just wish that they'd said 'There is some analysis of language, yes, in the way that he or she identifies the active verbs that are being used in this section, but she completely misses out the point that the reader is being included in first person pronouns' or something like that, you know, more demonstrative. They'd actually demonstrated what you could say about language use as opposed to just generically referring to whatever that …

PG: I want to go back to assessment in a minute because you were talking much earlier about the fact that you think it became the tail that wagged the dog, but I want to think – you know, in your experience as the verification chair did it feel to you like a successful system?

JM: The actual process of the hierarchical – but not in a negative sense – way of getting to everybody, I felt that was a good model, that sort of tree. It just crossed my mind that when it was introduced earlier there were really broad bands that people were going to fit into…

PG: Five. Five assessment scores that you could get, A to E.

JM: Yes. And then, they put in pluses and minuses to divide it up.

PG: Initially only pluses.

JM: Yes, I think – actually, I think it was only pluses, because minuses were a negative context, so that went to 10 or 11 if you counted F for unsatisfactory. But, they were considered to be too broad and insufficient distinction between individual students, and I felt that that was a pity.

PG: When you say 'they', who do you think considered…

JM: 'The powers that be', you know.

PG: And who did you see as 'the powers that be' at that point?

JM: I think it was the Board of Studies, but they were also reacting very much to the sorts of mother of kids who'd write in and that sort of thing. I know from being on the FOSC and the Key Learning Area Committee over those years in the '90s there was quite a lot of reaction to public …

PG: And, do you think the tertiary institutes had a role in that too?

JM: Yes. The whole idea that we would do their sorting out for them as to who got into medicine at Melbourne, that was definitely part of it. One of the things that is actually very interesting is what they have done with equating the IB assessment into the ATAR. See, they have only seven levels per subject. I was speaking to a girl once who got 30 out of 45 for her IB which I thought was probably average for English overall, totting up the sevens for each subject

PG: Of course, yes.

JM: And, she got 30 and it came in as an ATAR of 94 or something, whereas it wasn't the equivalent at all, and I see that there's been some scores picked up for equating them just in the last few weeks.

PG: So, the pressures on the Board of Studies, you're saying you think they did come from the tertiary sector who wanted the …

JM: Oh yes, the tertiary sector …

PG: But you're saying it also came from the parent body?

JM: Well, I think that probably some of the parents were reacting to the tertiary sector in the sense that how can it distinguish who's able to get into things. But interestingly enough, around about the same time they started introducing – to get into any of the medical sciences you had to do the interview and the MAP test and that sort of thing, so they were realising that just getting a score – and also, I would have thought that – the other thing that seemed to alter over time was the percentage of internal assessment and external assessment that was allowed, because it used to be something like 70/30 I think, whereas now I think every study has to be 50% externally assessed.

PG: Hmm, it does.

JM: So, that was reined in.

PG: That's right, that was a reaction to teacher judgement.

JM: Yes, and I was going to say it was implying that teachers couldn't be relied upon to judge their own work, and I think that had verification continued – expensive though well it may have been – there might have been more faith in teacher assessment, but it really didn't last very long.

PG: Any further comments on the drafting process in the Writing folio?

JM: Well, I think that that was – as I said before, that was one of the casualties of the fact that other subject areas couldn't seem to work through the drafting of the CATs. I think that they didn't – English teachers seemed over the years to have developed a way of knowing when a piece had reached its optimum and where more work on it would be detrimental, but in perhaps more content-based courses if students would hand in drafts the teachers would be complaining about the extra work of you're really assessing something four or five times before it eventually is handed in, and it's usually you, not them that had been responsible for things.

PG: And, I think the public perception – I remember cartoons of people talking about the family writing the CAT around the dinner table.

JM: Exactly, that sort of thing.

PG: Public perception was …

JM: And parents saying things like, 'I worked for hours on that and I only got a B!' That sort of thing.

PG: That was certainly driven by a notion that education is something that only happens in a classroom.

JM: Exactly, and that the teacher is there to knock students' work into shape and just to keep responding and make sure that nothing gets passed and that this is first class material before it's submitted. Whereas, you know, it's the old silk purse, sow's ear, and for some reason they think that those skills that can be assessed under exam conditions are the important ones, whereas I think maybe English, of all disciplines, realises that oral, group work, all that sort of thing is what they're going to use later in their lives.

PG: Hmm, and drafted writing.

JM: Hmm, yes, yes.

PG: Any comments about the changing size of the text list? I think it started off as 60, didn't it?

JM: It used to be incredibly long.

PG: That was part of the catering for a wide range of students.

JM: Yes, and then I think they've whittled it down to the ones that are going to be examined, isn't it? For a long time, I've really only been involved with English Language, so I'm not really familiar with what's happened with the text lists and things, but you see once again one text list to deal with the whole cohort is totally because for assessment reasons; if you're going to ask the questions about it, you have to have a common group of texts.

PG: Yes. So Janet, still on the idea of assessment, I am interested now for you to think looking back, do you think there is – given that the validity of the assessment was queried during the early days of the VCE when it was so school-based, with all your experience as an assessor and as someone who's worked in assessment centres in the traditional way and someone involved in verification, do you think there was a difference in the validity of assessment?

JM: Well, I think that certainly as far as the public perception of the validity of assessment tended to dictate the way in which assessment was carried out. I mentioned before a couple of things such as the professional development nature of the moderation system at a school and being developed into really verification was a moderation system for the state, and also, I mentioned about the fact that originally there were wide bands of assessment into which work could be placed just A to E and it was considered that that wasn't a fine enough distinction. I think that the universities are partly responsible for this in the sense that they didn't do their own selection; they expected the final year of schooling to do it for them. I didn't mention this before, but from my education I didn't have to wait until what is now actually quite early, mid-December, to get my results to know what I was eligible to apply for and whether I had got into the university of my first choice. I knew in my second last year of high school where I was going to university, what course I was going to do; all I had to do was virtually remain upright for the remainder of the schooling and I would be accepted. But the fact that the universities wanted people to just make these fine distinctions between a 96.5 and a 96.75 and also the fact that parents and the general public, actually, saw this as being important too, that teachers weren't capable of making these judgements, that they had to be done under exam conditions and a distinction had to be made between various students largely for selection purposes.

PG: And, of course, one of the factors was that with the VCE you had much higher retention of students into Year 12. That was one of the aims of the course, but it was one of the things that undermined the vision also.

JM: And also, the fact that you got your VCE just by satisfactorily completing the course. You didn't necessarily have to involve yourself in the assessment process. What was I going to say? Something about the – it's gone out of my head now. Oh, I do think it was a valuable – the method of assessment that they brought in originally in the VCE I thought was a valuable thing for both professional development and for just improving the accuracy of teachers' assessment and the validity of it. Unfortunately, although teachers seemed to realise that it was a good thing, it wasn't necessarily seen as such by the public, who felt that there were ways of manipulating it or fudging it or whatever, and everything had to be worked out against something else, and I think that actually that attitude has governed the whole NAPLAN issue, all of that sort of stuff. But, the unfortunate thing in the types of things that are being assessed that can be done with pen and paper or on a screen these days are not necessarily the types of things or the skills that are valuable or that the English course sets out to develop in students. They're not necessarily the sorts of things that are assessable under exam conditions.

PG: So, just as a final thought, looking back on that I think of it as a grand experiment in a way, that really didn't last in its initial formulation for very long.

JM: But, I think in the meantime it actually gave people a mind shift. It had its effect even though it didn't exist in its ideal form for very long, but I do think it made a mind shift. You were talking about different ways in which the marking is done these days at a marking centre where everybody goes through a moderation process before they do it or sample scripts put in that you have to get within the range or otherwise you're spoken to to make you a little more accurate – not more accurate, but more in tune with the rest of the markers, those sorts of things. That is still a form of moderation, verification, whatever you might want to call it, but it still exists as a way of doing things. It's not a person sitting away with a pile of scripts in a room on their own just marking and that being unchallenged as the result.

PG: So, you think that that experiment still has some payoff now for English?

JM: Oh, I think so. I think that people realised that if there is an expectation that there will be some sort of uniformity, validity in the method of assessment and the outcomes, the way in which the outcomes are assessed, I think that it has had that sort of runoff. But, I do think that – we're talking about 30 years ago that this course was developed and it is pre all of the advances in technology. The idea of students having their own device in a classroom and working so independently would not have been seen 30 years ago, so maybe the Study Design and its method of assessment have passed their use-by date.