Doug McCurry interviewed by Meredith Maher

MM: Could you say a few words about how you became involved in the Study Design process?

DM Alright. Well, it was when Terry Hayes retired or wanted out, I think, of being Executive Examiner for Literature, I'd gone onto the examining panel for two years and then I kind of became Executive Examiner, and I don't know exactly how that happened, but that's what happened. So, I was Executive Examiner, I think from 1980 till 1992.

MM: This is Literature?

DM: Literature. But, that also meant you were on – what was it called – the Subject Committee.

MM: The FOSC?

DM: No. Field of Studies Committee was when they were bringing things together. Before that it was the English Subject Committee, right, and that was a VISE (Victorian Institute of Secondary Education) – you've got to put all this together in the sequence of a VISE, right.

MM: Yes, yes.

DM: So, it was – in fact probably – I don't know whether Terry did one year of a VISE course; he might have, but I might have done the – well, he might have done the first and I might have done the second of the VISE Literature courses. That meant I became Deputy whatever it was, Chairperson of the English Subject Committee. Now, it would have been Brian McFarlane, or – no, in fact it was the tertiary rep at that time. The first couple were a guy from Monash and someone else, so at that time there was still a certain amount of tertiary involvement. The big change for VISE was moving out of controlling certification and putting it in the hands of representative groups and teachers.

MM: Well, of course, before that it had been Victorian Universities and Schools Examinations Board (VUSEB).

DM: Yes.

MM: With the U coming first.

DM: Yes, and I was never involved in the committee for them, although I did mark for them. So, VISE was in itself a very significant enterprise, and in many ways, really, it was the formation of – and to a significant degree I think that came from a cabal of very good people coming from ACER; Graeme Withers among them, but there are a number of others, but they went and set up VISE. Lindsay MacKay, you know. I could name half a dozen of them, actually. And those people were very significant. VISE was a really interesting – I think it was probably the most thoughtful development of an examination board you could envisage. The documentation they did was good, the procedures were good, and it was, as Helen Howells will no doubt recall, it had a representative intention and so on and so on and so on. So, I was Deputy Chairperson – oh no, John Brenan was the one I was first Deputy to. No, Brian I think first, and then John Brenan and eventually Helen. So that was the kind of sequence; that's how I got involved. And then, when the design of the VCE came around I was quite interested in it and got involved. I was a part-time writer for it for two years or something, and I think they were my last years of teaching. I left – I've never taught the VCE; I only was involved in that development and then I sort of – I did Literature for a couple of years, I think. No, no, never – that's right. I've never marked that questionless question thing on the VCE Literature paper

MM: Yeah, which I think would have been – that came in with the VCE.

DM: Yep. So, I don't believe I ever – yeah, I in fact did the last propositional essay examination, and after that, I don't know who did it. It might have been Terry; it might have been John Lewis, I don't know.

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MM: My memory's a bit hazy on that too, because I took some time out of marking. I'm sure I marked when David my son was a baby, but I'm not sure just how much beyond that.

DM: Yeah. So, that was why I was doing it. I mean, I was at that time very interested in the whole educational enterprise, particularly – the reason I left teaching, really, is because I prefer learning to teaching, and I found that getting excitement on top of classroom teaching was very difficult to do and I didn't know how to do it at that stage, so at that stage being Executive Examiner and all those things, it was just a murderous kind of ...

DM: Which school were you at at the time?

Well, to begin with I was at Traralgon, and then I went to Camberwell Girls Grammar, and then I went to Preshil; the last two years I was at Preshil. But, it was kind of murderous to do a whole lot of stuff on top of trying to be an effective teacher. So, when I went to ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) I worked all the time but I didn't have a holiday – in fact, I didn't have any leave for two years, and I didn't need it! You don't need – if you go out of the classroom, and I had so much intellectual excitement, it was really interesting and stimulating and challenging, so of course I kind of lost my – well, I don't know, I was disconnected from it and was focussed on other things, really. The other thing that happened was when we – that was when I worked with Margaret Gill and Graeme Withers and Alma Ryrie-Jones was on the initial writing test for the VCE, which was very interesting. That was where I met Graeme and subsequent to that I got offered the job at ACER. I got offered the job at ACER because there's a very strong writing culture at ACER and it's quite – it stretches back to the 1960s. I've just written a monograph on CSSE; do you know CSSE? The Commonwealth Senior Secondary Scholarship?

MM: Yes, Year 10.

DM: Exactly. Now, that was a huge – that decade of that scholarship was an extraordinary impact on ACER as an organisation, and in fact a lot of impact on Australian education, I think. As I say, I've written a monograph on it and part of that's about the history of writing assessment and ACER, and I didn't know it, but all of my instincts and intuitions about writing/teaching and writing/assessing were absolutely in line with this kind of culture, and so Graeme said, 'Right, come and join us.' I mean he didn't say anything about why, and I said, 'No, I don't want to.' And, he said, 'Yes, you do.' 'No, I don't.' Anyway, so that went on for some time. Because, I loved Preshil; I really liked it, and I was saying in 1988 it's wonderful where you'll be teaching in the year 2000, you know? Because, I was going to stay there for life. Pity I didn't, but that's life. There have been difficulties working at ACER for me, but it's so interesting. So many interesting intellectual opportunities and challenges, so I had more than enough intellectual adventure, but a lot of angst and a lot of unpleasantness, too. Being the opposition is not a comfortable position. So, yeah, okay. I was a part-time writer, that was ...

MM: Yeah, which leads on very nicely, because the big difference about the first English Study Design was that it was conceived as a common course. So, from your perspective what would you see – or what did you see as the major implications of that?

DM: Oh, I think it was – to a significant degree that was – there are two meanings of common, one of which is compulsory, so it was a euphemism for compulsory, right? And that wouldn't have been true of T12 or STC, and common also meant – sorry, that's ...

MM: They didn't have a compulsory English component?

DM: I don't think so, and I think that was a crucial element of commonality. The other one was the argument which said it'd be a good thing for everyone to be doing one thing the same, which was true enough except that it was also in some ways a political argument, because what you know is kids do English in lines, don't they, and all the Science kids do it with all the Science kids, and so on and so on and so on. A lot of it's not really common. But, I mean I'm certainly in favour of compulsory English and remain in favour of compulsory English. I think I'm also in favour of compulsory Maths, now! Yeah, so I

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think in essence it was a political argument, really, which is well, we want compulsory English, and the real issue was the common course meant everyone's going to come with the same dispensation. English was only a part of that, really. It was the idea of a single certificate, that was the issue. So, English was part of that. The common course part was the compulsory part, so that's what it meant in English, yeah? Is that sort of ...

MM: No, that makes sense, yep. How contested was it?

DM: Oh, compulsory English had always been contested. VISE had had a couple of goes at it in the 1980s.

MM: Hmm, there was a 1980 review, wasn't there?

DM: Yeah. And they lost out; English teachers were pretty vociferous and there was a fair amount of community support, but then look what's happened: we've now got English, Literature and English Language as equivalents, so there's no common course, is there?

MM: No, no.

DM: And, I think the – certainly for me one of the reasons for common – accepting a compulsory English is that it seems to me that it should be a humane study, a humanities study and that's why I don't like English Language as an equivalent, for instance. Nor even Literature, I think. I wouldn't make Literature an equivalent, actually, but I think English should be a kind of humanities study, and that's the reason why I've always supported it.

MM: By that, do you mean the kind of classroom in which contemporary issues and philosophical issues can be discussed?

DM: Yep, yep.

MM: Yeah.

DM: And I think that's a key element of English and I think in the whole school system, and I think that's the reason why it should be compulsory in Year 12. That kind of humane study should continue into Year 12 compulsorily, I think. I think it's a serious – you look at the British system, you know, Physics, Chemistry and Maths and that's all you do; that's not satisfactory. It's quite unsatisfactory, I think. And I think the idea that kids are compelled to do English here and, in many cases, compelled to include it in a TER or ATAR is a good idea.

MM: Yeah, yep. Okay. You came from a school setting to work on the writing?

DM: Yep.

MM: What was your perspective on the role of the profession there? How did you see that?

DM: I thought it was – I mean, clearly by that time under the VISE influence you thought of curriculum development as a kind of committee, kind of professionals, you know; you thought of it as a representative kind of thing that was going to be done with consultation and so on and so on and so on, and the development of the VCE, particularly there was a good deal of consultation. I think a lot of it – but you've also seen it happen. You can do an extensive consultation process and have it change nothing.

MM: Yes!

DM: It's simply a kind of window dressing. I think you'd want to have a close look at how they actually – see, the real issue is where's the line management here, you know? And, look at the situation in VCAA

now. We have a line manager that controls the subject, isn't it? You have ad hoc committees for various purposes and ad hoc consultations; that's it. Now, there's no English Subject Committee and there's no Chairperson of the English Subject Committee, is there? Nup. In fact, it's all line management. In fact, the Manager of English, really, well, the Manager of English takes directions from – you know, yes, and that's the way it works; it's the line management thing. The idea of it being a kind of representative, consultative, collaborative – nup. I mean that bit of history I'd like to know, how did they simply just kind of wipe that out? Had they decided, 'Oh look, this is a waste of time; let's change it into – let's get control.' I mean I'm not even sure about what's the current procedure is – have they got a curriculum committee? The curriculum committee in VISE was very powerful, very significant. I think they have a curriculum committee in VCAA, but I think if you took a look at it you'd find that it was not the equivalent, and it certainly isn't the kind of overview of a whole range of subject committees. There are no subject committees. There are none in the ministries any more, are there? There's not an English subject committee in the ministry and there was. That's the – I mean, in retrospect it looks like the 70s and 80s were a kind of Maoist sort of optimism and things moved on. I mean, managerial – you felt managerialism by the end of the 1980s. And that just meant, what did we have all that – who makes the decisions here? You do. You tell them and they do this. The idea of consultation, collaboration and professional sort of involvement, you know, didn't survive into the '90s, did it?

MM: Hmm, and I think that's one of the regrets that some people have, that the opportunity to shape and to have that kind of robust discussion is gone.

DM: Yep. Look, can I go back and say there are a number of other things that I regret, which would be going back to the 1970s. I had the good fortune of never teaching the VCE, and I think that's good fortune because I think it was extremely prescriptive. Not extremely prescriptive; it was prescriptive and I'm certainly not in favour of that prescriptiveness. A lot of what I was trying to do was to keep things open, to not be prescriptive, but that certainly wasn't the impulse of the people who were controlling it, Ann Borthwick (Policy Officer, VCAB Board) and Peter Hill (Chairperson VCAB) and Geoff Masters (ACER) and those people. They wanted prescription; they wanted to tell the teachers that this – the words echoed through the development of the VCE – was 'high quality curriculum'. Now, the assumption was that there's this low-quality curriculum of some kind or other, and then there's high quality curriculum, and what we're going to do is we're going to mandate and prescribe high quality curriculum. I don't actually believe in that.

MM: I would have thought, though, the kind of openness of the Study Design, the fact that there was a study design, not a syllabus, not a course of study, but a study design within which teachers, schools, teams of teachers, were able to fulfil those requirements in relation to their local circumstances.

DM: Except that it's also true that there are work requirements for the first time. There'd never been work requirements before. When I started some of the options had work requirements in them, but that was only a part of the pre-VCE. It was still HSC, we called it, wasn't it?

MM: Yes, yeah.

DM: When I started teaching in 1973 or 1974, the handbook for English was two pages. One page of a number of dot points of goals and the other page was the booklet.

MM: Yes!

DM: Now, we might look back on that and say, 'Oh, well look at how much more we do now.' Well, I think I liked it then, right, because no one told me how I was to get to the exam at the end. Now, you're made to go through all sorts of hoops, it seems to me, and I'm glad I'm not doing it. So, if I had my way I'd have been much less prescriptive in fact than it turned out to be, and it's unarguable, it seems to me, that the VCE was much more prescriptive than HSC. It was intended to be, I think. That was certainly the vision – does the name Ann Borthwick come up much anymore?

MM: It's been mentioned, yes, yep. I worked with Ann; I remember her, yep.

DM: And – Peter Hill, certainly wanted prescription. Geoff Masters was into prescription.

MM: Yeah.

DM: And, I think one of the biggest – I have a difficulty because I hear teachers talking now and there's a lot of discouragement about the quality of the profession from others within it, I think. So, I began in the 70s on the assumption that we were trying to avoid prescription and control and so on, but that's become less, and of course it's become much more the case, much more prescription, much more control. I don't know, but there's a lot of complaints from the people I know about the bureaucracy and the kind of administration and so on that they feel they're subject to. The other one, of course, has been – see, Peter Hill had a vision of in-school moderation, right? And, I think he got that up, not within his time but it's got up since. I believe that the – well, my intuition is that the kind of pressure on teachers within school from moderation is really pretty significant.

MM: Well, it's required or assumed for any subject for which there are multiple classes because ultimately there's a ranking exercise involved for school-based assessment, but it's now in what I'm seeing filtering down to lower levels in the secondary school as well.

DM: See, I suppose I, in a reconstructed way, have an intuition that we aren't trying to turn teachers into producing a standardised performance; we don't expect them to do the same things in the same way, you know what I mean? Some people's strengths are going to be these kinds and let them play to them. Some people are going to have strengths of another kind; let them play to it. Now clearly, we have to get some kind of minimum sort of expectations and so on, but I'm not convinced that the best way to do that is to have a set of work requirements that are kind of mandated and you have to go through the motions with them.

MM: So, you wouldn't agree with the lesson by lesson plans that some schools are now required to document?

DM: I think that'd be horrible, and particularly because it seems to me that good teaching has a marked degree of spontaneity in it, and a marked degree of individuality. I mean, I have team taught with another English teacher and that was fantastic, but that was a fortunate one. The idea of making me team teach or even teaching the same things as another half a dozen people doesn't appeal to me at all, and the reason being that sure, you want to do that, you think that's the best way to do it; fair enough but I don't. And, I don't think what's me at my best is what someone else wants to do or can do and the other way around, if you know what I mean. I think for instance, one of the best teachers I know taught in exactly the opposite way to me and yet I could always appreciate how good she was. She could never have taught the way I did, and I could never have taught the way she did. And that was right; that's the way it is. It's a really individual kind of interaction between you and the kids, and to attempt to standardise it, I think is really quite worrying.

MM: Yep. Having your arms in a strait jacket thing.

DM: Yeah. I'm glad I was never subject to it.

MM: Okay.

DM: Obviously the representative role was good, yep.

MM: Some people I know had concerns about how well it was going to cater for cohorts that they knew, but I might leave it to them to pick up on those questions. What did you see as the implications for pedagogy? Did the VCE Study Design change the way that teachers might need to teach in order to fulfil those expectations?

DM: I mean, obviously there are a number of ideas, all sorts of ideas running through it. As I recall, the work requirements were not that prescriptive, were not particularly intrusive, so if that was managed to be the case then that was good. There were lots of good things that were being encouraged, but you know – pedagogy ...

MM: I'm thinking of things like the Writing folio, Communication Project …

DM: But the Writing folio had been there in the '80s, hadn't it? It really wasn't very different, was it?

MM: That's where I'm not sure because I wasn't teaching; I was working centrally at that time.

DM: Well, Margaret Gill – yeah, her Writing workshop option for the 1980s Group 1 English was much the same, really; there wasn't much difference. Certainly, the Communication Project was significantly different, and a kind of interesting idea and no doubt had some interesting manifestations, but of course it didn't last very long, did it? How long did it take, about two or three years before it was out of business?

MM: I'm not quite sure.

DM: It didn't last very long, but then much of those initial ideas didn't.

MM: Well, the revision of the first Study Design, its second incarnation, was significantly different, and then the revised VCE that came in in the late '90s was significantly different again. In Lit it's interesting that I think the changes were matters of form rather than substance; teachers could have – I think they felt fairly comfortable because they could recognise their previous practice or existing practice in each new study design.

DM: Yeah, and I think – see, that was certainly my intention in Literature and certainly in the exam, was to make that opportunity for teachers teaching in different ways and different styles accommodated within a very kind of loose framework. That was why I wanted to see the end of the propositional essay. Someone told me that theory is back.

MM: It is, yes. It has been there in Unit 3 Outcome 3 – Considering Alternative Viewpoints, but that is not inherently theoretical, although I think a lot of teachers would teach it that way. It's just moderating a debate, if you like, but now Creative has gone back into Unit 3 from Unit 4 and Unit 4 Outcome 1 is, if I can put it very simply, it's Views and Values but requires the consideration of 2 theoretical perspectives, so I think we'll see a lot more introduction of feminist critiques, post-colonial critiques and so on.

DM: Yeah, well …

MM: And that could well make the exam a little more difficult for some students.

DM: But how's that going to impact on the exam? Are they going to have a …

MM: I think VCAA has a policy that all outcomes need to be reflected in the exam, so there will be …

DM: A compositional essay on the theory.

MM: Not necessarily, not necessarily, but there will be some explicit address to it. That would be my reading of it.

DM: Well, anyway, that's what I tried to avoid and did for 20 years! Longer than that, 25 years, I think. Yeah, and the reason being that if you want to teach theory as a way of reading this text, there you go. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to, and that's – see, you can't have got a more open test

design, and that's the reason it survived, I think, was because people could go at it in their own way.

MM: I think by and large teachers are very happy with it, students know what they're doing, they do it in different ways, but they can do it according to their own best lights and by now, I think students actually do understand what the task is. It keeps that primacy of close analysis, too.

DM: I thought the one thing, the one change I would really have liked to have seen is unseen. I would like to see unseen examining. It's done in England, it's done in South Australia; I think it would be a good thing.

MM: What if the unseen is not unseen?

DM: Oh, well you certainly – there are plenty of capable – but then that's a very small kind of opportunity; that'd be the same as the GAT (General Achievement Task), wouldn't it? Oh, I've seen this before. But in most cases, you take something significantly, I think, less challenging and you set it as a course book or a poem or something, and it'd have to be more accessible than that, wouldn't it? But I mean I think it would be a really good – yeah, that's my preference really, would be that when you look – I did a review of English courses in England and New Zealand to compare them with ours and there's a significant number of unseens in those examinations, and I think that's really good, I've got to say. Because, the besetting weakness of English exams is that teachers want them to be highly predictable, don't they?

MM: Yeah, yeah.

DM: But, I mean that's a different topic. Where do you want to …

MM: I'm thinking about assessment, because in the early years of its introduction there were significant changes to assessment weren't there?

DM: Yeah.

MM: Can you talk about those? What do you recall?

DM: Well clearly, the failure of the common assessment tasks (CAT) approach was quite spectacular; it's probably one of the biggest facts of the 1990s, really, in assessment. Who was it, Sam Ball (CEO, Victorian Board of Studies) and Geoff Masters introduced the GAT …

MM: That's coming significantly later, though, I think.

DM: Is it?

MM: That was in …

DM: Oh, '94, '94.

MM: Was it as early as that? Gosh.

DM: Yes. The GAT was introduced – I think we did a study in '93 and introduced it in '94. So that's …

MM: Sorry, you did a study in another state, didn't you, of a public trial?

DM: Hmm. And, the object at that stage was to simply focus the kind of remarking, and I remember them spending a fortune on remarking.

MM: Verification, they would have called it.

DM: Yes, that's right; verification. Yeah, and the situation – well, I didn't follow it closely but then they subsequently put all of that out of business, didn't they? Statistical moderation effectively, but they also did get in-school moderation, didn't they, because in Group 1 in the 1980s you didn't have to put in a school cohort; you put in a class, which meant you didn't have to do … Well, I don't know, I suppose it depends on what your experience of within school moderation is. I don't know; I've never done it.

MM: Well, I certainly have in – well, in the life of this VCE, and it's actually good; it's good professional discussion, and I would have thought – and I recall that with those verification – actually there were moderation meetings prior to that, and it was teachers getting together and considering samples of work, but of course that's just astonishingly good professional development. The verification meetings were – I can remember they were similar too. I was a verification chairperson for North Eastern, and yeah, there was good professional discussion and then the chairpersons got together to look at samples as well. But, yeah, I think it was cost that put that out of action. I think I was part of a delegation from VATE that went to see Kwong Lee Dow (Chairperson of VISE) to argue for the retention of moderation on the grounds of its value, its professional development, and I think it was fairly clear that the cost was going to be the factor.

DM: But I think also, the thing that really put it out of business was cheating. I mean, when I go – I've worked in the VCAA in recent years quite a lot. They regard themselves as being absolutely hammered in the '90s on the cheating issues. They believe that there was a serious degree of rorting and that's what happened, and that's why it was not going to happen anymore. Now, that's – the casualty is moderation isn't it, but really that moderation was dependent on the notion of the range of tasks that were being done as common assessment tasks, wasn't it? That's what really killed it, I think. Money – yes, but also the belief that there was an extraordinary amount of cheating, or a very perturbing amount of cheating, I think.

MM: Hmm, and of course that was always possible, I suppose, where drafting was being done at home. I do remember seeing a cartoon – I doubt if I'd be able to find it, but it had the dining table with the student, the student's tutor, the uncle with the PhD, so all sitting around the table working on the common assessment task.

DM: Yeah, yeah. And I think it was a really interesting question about – I mean, I don't think Peter Hill or Geoff Masters or any of the other people who were behind that design really appreciated the culture of teaching in Victoria, so they didn't know that that was in a sense – that it had to be a different kind of process from the one that they envisaged. Don't you remember the 'Purple Peril', the consultation paper on VCE assessment, where we introduced the common assessment tasks approach?

MM: No, I can't, actually.

DM; Oh, that was the big issue, really.

MM: By common assessment tasks, do you mean the tasks that were done in school or the external common assessment tasks?

DM: Oh, the within school ones, the kind of ones done over an extended period in which there were opportunities for, how shall we say, consultation with other people. And now, of course, you have a situation, don't you, where many of those whatever they're called, are now done in class, aren't they?

MM: Under various conditions, of course.

DM: So, there's no work actually being assessed that's done in anything other than timed and controlled conditions.

DM: Not for English, although I think some schools will allow for certain tasks, the work's done in class, the draft is signed off, students can polish it and bring back essentially the same piece.

In other subjects, of course, like Art, Studio Arts and so on, a lot of the work is done outside class, but it does have to be authenticated.

DM: I also think if you looked at South Australia for instance, I think you'll find it has a more flexible system because they were more cautious and conservative in their introduction of things, so really it did crash and burn in Victoria. What it really needed was a kind of extended period of evolution and culture. See, I mean one of the things that is really extraordinary about our systems, is that teachers are in a conspiracy with the kids against the external examinations, okay? You're up against this external assessment. That's how our system works. But, if you're American you don't think that's the case. They don't see – that's not the situation. The teachers do school-based assessment and they represent the system; they're not the advocates of the kids. So, it's a completely different set of assumptions, and some people look at our system and say, 'Well, why can't we do it like that?' And when they attempt to, they find that it's not going to work. You'd have to have a big change in culture. I'm sorry, anyway, what were we…

MM: I'm thinking about the evolution of external assessment in those early years, sort of 1990 to 1992.

DM: I honestly wasn't – I mean, I wasn't really following it, to tell you the truth.

MM: Okay.

DM: I mean external assessment, I really don't know about.

MM: One teacher told me that at one stage there were two English exams; I think there was a writing test and ...

DM: Yeah, that was true, but I think that was in the first year and that was before the actual establishment of it. That was the one that I said I worked with on, with Graeme and Alma and Margaret. Gee, I honestly can't remember.

MM: No, that's alright.

DM: I think it'd be – I mean, one of the things that I reflect ruefully on, is that there's almost no reflection on examination papers in Australia. Now, I've written two things, one of which is in *English in Australia* (Vol.45, No2, 2010) called 'English Examinations in Australia*'* and it compares the English exams in different states. They're significantly different, but there's almost nothing in the AATE journal about exams; almost nothing, and the same's true of VATE, I think. There's sometimes advice on how to do stuff, but not even a lot of that.

MM: And you're thinking about a reflection on what constitutes good English assessment?

DM: Exactly. What would be – both, but you could look at the – wouldn't it be interesting if the AATE could say, 'These are the ways in which we do it in Australia. Look at this diversity, blah, blah, blah and there's real diversity, too.' And then you could look at it next to Britain and New Zealand and say, 'Okay, what have we got here? What are our principles?' Well, I don't see that conversation ever having been forwarded, to tell you the truth. You literally look at it, you try and find out a thing in an AATE journal. You have to go back in the 1980s for a thing by John Hay; there's almost nothing on exams. Nothing on principles or what would be good practice.

MM: You've done a couple, haven't you, as conference papers or …

DM: Two of them were in *English in Australia* I think; the one I talked about …

MM: Yeah, I've got those, yeah.

DM: Yeah, and the one comparing Australian ones with overseas. I mean it's really interesting. The most interesting thing coming out of it is that I believe that if I gave you the goals or aims or whatever it is of a course and said, 'Now, which of these examinations does this relate to?' You couldn't tell. Exams develop kind of archaeologically over a period, you know? And they're kind of cultural creations so they have historical roots. If you say 'How come you do this in Victoria?', it was because in the 1960s we did this and then we did that and then we did this. So, you end up with language in the media coming from clear thinking and all of those, they're kind of cultural creations, aren't they? It's a really interesting thing, I think, about how do exam systems develop. And, the idea that we write a set of goals and aims and objectives or something and then we design an exam, no way. It doesn't work like that at all.

MM: Well, the profession has a memory too.

DM: Of course, yeah.

MM: Yeah. And yet I'm sure that in each new project, each new evolution there is some benchmarking study that's done, you know; how's it done elsewhere? I know that in one of the committees that I was on which was to review the Study Design, the first step was benchmarking against interstate and international practice.

DM: Yeah, but those things – I saw one on Literature done by someone. It should have been published. Why wouldn't that end up in *English in Australia*? There's a lack of interest in the kind of systematic study of exam papers, I reckon, which is a pity. Anyway, so I don't know, really. I mean I don't know what happened much.

MM: Yeah, well I have some gaps in my knowledge, too, because of those years when I was working centrally and years when I was teaching but not teaching English.

DM: Wouldn't it be interesting to line up the English exams from 1980 to 2005 and look at what happened? I think that'd be really interesting.

MM: There's a project right there!

DM: Yes, yes, and I think it's a very interesting project, and to explain how it evolved and changed and so on, and what kind of forces shaped it I think would be interesting. And, we also need a kind of good critique – so I'd offer as a principle, that I want impromptu writing to be a significant amount of the examination in English. And by that I mean writing on a topic you didn't comment on – see, what's the most appalling thing in English examining is the thematic study. Think about it for a minute. It's actually a kind of – you set the topic two years in advance, the kids drill the topic for 12 months and they come in and then they regurgitate that material. Well, why do we have that in English? Well, it's so we can prepare it in content terms, isn't it? That's what a thematic study is. Well, I would get rid of it. I think it's actually an anathema. I think the kids should come in and have to write about something that they have to think about.

MM: It's one of the things I've always thought about the Literature exam, at least in its current non-propositional form, is that there is so many different ways in which students can respond, whereas I think with English there's a lot more formulaic writing.

DM: Yep, and the reason I want to go away from the propositional essay is that I'm really – I reckon there's real problem – I just glanced recently at an English exam and I thought there was some really poor questions on it. Now, I know that's easy to say, and I'm saying get out of it, because I think it's very difficult not to find yourself in that situation. If you can get out of it, do so. Well, you can get out of it, I think. So, you now give them a choice, too, on English; two propositional essays. If they choose the wrong one then – hmm, yeah. Anyway, but I mean I'd like to see what are AATE's 10 principles of good examining in English? Whatever are they?

MM: I'm not sure that such a document exists.

DM: No.

MM: Yeah, well I think ...

DM: Honestly, what will – yeah, I don't know, really, what the Study Design ...

MM: Yeah, well you weren't teaching at the time of its implementation.

DM: No, no. I don't know.

MM: I think a lot of people who are involved in this early stage are no longer connected with teaching, and even the focus that they had at that particular time is no longer their current focus, and that makes perfect sense to me.

DM: Yep. Well, I suppose what do I reflect? Yeah, I think the Study Design was a very optimistic thing. I do have – I am ambivalent about the amount of built-in prescription in it. I think if I had my way it'd be less prescriptive, but then – you know, that was really pushing against it because there were a lot of people who wanted real prescription. The leadership was about prescription.

MM: And you were getting that direction from above?

DM: Oh yes, and I was always looking for ways of trying to keep it open if I could.

MM: Wriggle room?

DM: Yeah, and as much as possible, and I don't know to what extent that was successful. And, I also think the biggest issue we've got is whether or not something of the consensus that I hear that there are a significant number of teachers who have to be told what to do is actually justified. I don't know whether that's the case. There seems to me that teachers are coming into conflict with a fair amount – but a fair amount of suspicion about the quality of them. But I don't know, I don't know if it's fair or not. I don't know. And I think there was a fair amount of that by the time you got to the early '90s; that's why they wanted prescription, a one-page course description is not enough.

MM: I wonder if that was coming from that sort of impetus that led to a change of government, because I certainly know that the Coalition was doing intensive research before the election which led to the change of government, and that had impact of course on VCE.

DM: Well, in our lifetime we've seen a fairly significant erosion of the sense in which teachers were professionals, don't you think? I certainly feel that that's the case. And, I think the MySchool website was really the death knell of that, when you get the idea of setting up competition between schools seems to me just anathema. And that's the stated intention, isn't it, make schools compete with one another. And turning NAPLAN into a kind of means of competition, I think it's really poor. And that shows a real lack of trust and a kind of lack of acceptance of professional involvement on the part of teachers, so it's been a pretty miserable decline. And, I've seen it go from no national testing when I went to ACER in 1988 to we now have a national test in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and the results go on the website. It's just – if you'd said that was the fate in 1990 you'd have thought it's really draconian, well that's what we've got.