Graeme Withers interviewed by Terry Hayes

TH: The first question I want to put to you, Graeme, is about your own involvement in the development of the Study Design and what experiences and perspectives you brought to the discussion, in particular what kind of official role(s) you played in the process

GW: I was chosen by VISE because I was Chairman of the Assessment Procedures Committee ...

TH: And you were on that because you had a background in educational research because of you work at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)?

GW: Yes. And, that was it. That's how it started.

TH: So, it started out of kind of a committee that was already established and doing other stuff as well.

GW: Yeah. There were a multitude of courses, and what the English Course Design group said, there ought to be a single course for all learners of Year 12.

TH: I might come to that notion of a single course in a second, because I want to really introduce an anecdote here about my first experience of you and your involvement in this thing, as it was to do with the multitude of courses. It was a very hot January night at Melbourne Uni. We were sitting in a science lab as I recall, it was part of – it might have even been a VATE consultation or information session with teachers, and you said, 'Now, what you have to remember is if you enter into this process you are recognising that the 2000 courses that already exist, the 2000 senior English courses that already exist in Victoria are going to be kind of crunched, if you like, into one single study.' Now, what was your notion of the single study?

GW: The Year 11 courses were being brought into line, and eventually they became – I can't remember what they were called. Study 1 and Study 2, and then Year 12, the common course which consisted of all those bits. So, a single subject structure was developed for all Year 12 and eventually filtered down to Year 11 as well.

TH: And this was the thinking, in kind, of the educational institution before we even got around to developing the VCE Study Design: it was already an idea that was on the move.

GW: Yeah. The Blackburn Report had said that subjects should be common, general, emphasise mutuality and cooperation, not be narrowly vocational, and be challenging and rigorous, and we kept that in mind as well. The Minister for Education. I can't remember who it was.

TH: It was either Robert Fordham or Ian Cathie.

GW: Anyway, they wanted us to design a structure for English that would allow the four units in sequence across Years 11 and 12, and which would accommodate all the TAFE, T12, VISE, group 1 and 2, the approved study structures, all that ...

TH: And was there a big scoping exercise done to kind of work out what was actually out there to begin with, do you know?

GW: No, no.

TH: Because, one of the things in the interview with Alma Ryrie-Jones is she said she came on board because she thought when they started the process they weren't aware of the kind of work that was being done in adult literacy and the kind of areas that she worked in.

GW: Well, we knew about them, but what we said was if TAFE courses want to be in the VISE structure, they can, or they can stay separate.

TH: Right, so they were given that kind of choice.

GW: Yeah. And, I think all of them did. I don't remember – no.

TH: Now, a question about a phrase that's often used in relation to the development of this study is English being 'an agent of community'. Are you aware of the origin of that, where it came from?

GW: No.

TH: Was it used a great deal? I mean it appealed to me at the time because it struck me as a way of bringing very diverse cohorts of kids in a particular school into one kind of space to talk about common themes or so.

GW: No, I don't remember that as an issue. In effect in senior secondary education it became an agent of community because everybody was doing a common course, and what we were trying to do, I guess, was to protect Year 11 which had hitherto been left up to schools, basically, to bring it in in such a way that Year 11 wasn't left out but that a reasonable progress between Year 11 and 12 could be achieved with the units that were available.

TH: And, what about – I'm looking at question 3 here. What was your sense of the way the profession itself was invited to be involved in the process? I've already mentioned the consultation session when I first became aware of you. What was your sense of the teaching profession involvement in it?

GW: The membership of the VISE committee/advisory group was as wide-reaching as we could do it, and each member had some particular bailiwick which they represented and which they were expected to report back to. That's all.

TH: My memory of it was there was no official VATE representation but almost every English teacher there was in VATE, they were all strong VATE personnel.

GW: Yeah. I think actually Helen Howells represented VATE Council. She was on VATE Council ...

TH: Yes, she certainly was. She was Vice President at the time.

GW: Yeah.

TH: And, what about the general profession in terms of – so, it was left up to those representatives on that committee to ensure that their constituency was as fully informed as possible?

GW: Yeah. And, Win McDonnell (VISE manager) was on it to keep us all in line…

TH: She was the VISE representative?

GW: Yeah. And, Doug McCurry represented English Literature because he was Chief Examiner but actually came to have a greater impact on it, not by virtue of being English Lit, but by virtue of being a teacher.

TH: But I also think, because of the way that texts in literature could be assessed, in part moving from that 'gallery' to the 'workshop' model, I think Doug brought a lot of that kind of knowledge to bear on the way texts ought to be taught and assessed in English, too.

GW: Yeah. The text list was amazing.

TH: All 60 of them, yes.

GW: Yeah.

TH: I've actually read all of them because of my membership of the External CAT Setting Panel, the Text Response one. We might come to that in a later question, because one of my feelings about interviewing you is that you've got a lot of expertise in evolving a particular process for text response. On the whole question of the text response issue your knowledge is vital. Now, on the question about the achievements and drawbacks of the English Study Design, you said that you probably needed to see a copy of the design in front of you, but just as a general question, do you think it catered for the cohort of Year 11 and 12 students reasonably well?

GW: Oh yes.

TH: Yeah.

GW: Yeah, and teachers also, too.

TH: I got that impression just being a teacher. Yep. And, they seemed to change the way they thought about the pedagogy, about how they had to teach. I've already mentioned the fact that Doug, working with Ian Reid (the author of *The Making of Literature*) was very influenced by what Ian had to say about moving from the 'gallery' to the 'workshop' teaching of texts.

GW: Yeah.

TH: So, you're not too aware of what impact it had on the teaching?

GW: No … I wasn't teaching at the time. I was into a different thing. One thing that was sparked off in VISE or VCAB or whoever they were, was some discussion about non-competitive assessment, and there were members of VISE and VCAB who were interested in the notion and they actually published a paper which I wrote jointly with Greg Cornish (VISE Liaison Officer) on non-competitive assessment. It never got very far, but if you want an impact on pedagogy, in formative assessment in schools, not the summative assessments of public exams, the formative assessment in schools, I think it might have changed pedagogy a bit for a while.

TH: I think you're right in terms of just thinking of something like the Writing workshop, the fact that there's emphasis on drafting and editing and that formative assessment came into it. But I also think, what do you think – I've heard some arguments too, that the introducing of the satisfactory or unsatisfactory completion of work requirements can also be both non-competitive and competitive in the way it operated. Would you have had much to do with the development of that notion?

GW: No.

TH: Because, that seemed to me to be where they were saying if you did the work, we weren't assessing you against other kids; we were assessing you against the fact that you reached certain kind of criteria in the work itself.

GW: No.

TH: No? Well, now we do come to the bigger question, which is about the CAT, the exam CAT, the Text Response CAT; you've already mentioned the fact that there were 60 texts set for study. Can you recall whether in the initial discussions it was always going to be one external CAT and that CAT was going to be the text response, or were there other options around at the time?

GW: No, I think that was it. They (VCAB) set it up, they told us to go ahead and try it, pilot it, which we duly did in various ways. It was reviewed, it was piloted at one school by a small group of teachers, and the results were published in a monograph by Margaret Gill and myself which teachers loved.

TH*:* Graeme Withers and Margaret Gill, *Assessing text response: the 1990 pilot CAT: a review for teachers*. We'll be archiving that. I'd like to break this Text CAT down into several questions. One is what do you think of the idea of setting 60 texts?

GW: It was totally feasible if you gave the kids the choice of an achievable task, which we called a prompt, a choice of prompts, their choice of texts and the only rule was that they had to choose one text – although some of them did more than one, but we let that go – they had to choose one prompt and again, some of them to combine two prompts to write their answer, and again we let that go. But, they loved it and the book is full of both teacher and student responses to the task of reading a prompt and writing something to it. There's a section called, 'How did you learn best to prepare for the Text Response CAT?' and there's a whole group of things that kids did. 'What was your main impression during the CAT session?' And again, kids responded. 'How did you feel before you sat for the CAT?' Again – and there's a general set of stuff from teaching. 'How did you feel after you sat for the CAT?' from kids, and 'How did you feel after you marked the CAT?' for teachers. And, they're all in here.

TH: And noting the positive responses, I'd imagine some responses that allowed you to think about how you might kind of refine it.

GW: Yeah, yeah. What questions we would have used as a set of prompts for the next year, I'm not sure, because of issues to do with prepared answers, plagiarism, etc...

TH: But, you were conscious of that, because I notice you've also written a research paper called *Planning, Drafting and Prepared Answers*. Also for the archives. Was there a lot of concern about this notion of the kind of prompt that was being promoted leading to prepared answers?

GW: Teachers initially thought that prepared answers might occur, but in the end, I think, it was a non-event. I'm not sure, yeah.

TH: Except for the politics of the CAT Setting Panel, because there seemed to be quite a coherent group of progressive educationists who kind of supported the Study Design right through until this point, and then you got controversy over – well, in fact, the controversy led you to resign from the panel because of what you saw as unprofessional behaviour on the part of some of the members of it. An issue they kept coming back to was prepared answers, didn't it, about the kind of prompt ...

GW: Yeah. The subsidiary issue was learners of English as a second language, there was concern about that, but that, too, in the trial worked out beautifully. They tended to cluster on one prompt, one group of prompts, but they didn't perform significantly differently from the mainstream characters who did the same prompts, and that's recorded in there.

TH: I take it you were one of the architects of this notion of the prompt as a different kind of way of assessing a text to the normal kind of analytical questions that were asked in the past. Where did that idea come from? Was that something you'd read about in research, or …

GW: No, no, no. It was looking for a word that didn't say 'topic' or 'theme' or – you know, the words that people – 'Write an essay on this theme', 'Write an essay on this topic'. What we were looking for was some sort of neutral word that allowed kids to pick up whichever of the ideas they had about a text and adapt it to their own ...

TH: I thought one of its strengths was the fact that it got away from 'Guess what ideas are in the examiner's head about this particular text', which is the way questions are usually framed, how to prompt about a specific text.

GW: Well, that was certainly the case. The kids loved doing it, they really did.

TH: And then you let them be either analytical or creative, and they did a lot of drafting and …

GW: They did a lot of drafting. The review for teachers gives a whole set of drafts and final responses, which kids had at the trial school.

TH: So, they used that process for the exam?

GW: Yeah. They'd do that at the trial school, so you'd get a mind map of *The Accidental Tourist* as preparation and then the fully worked out document, or some of them drafted in conventional prose terms and went on and did a final copy.

TH: Right.

GW: Oh yeah, they were certainly what teachers saw as one of its strengths.

TH: Yes. And, what about the other CATs? Were you aware of any controversy about them, and how much kind of awareness did you have of the issues to do with internal assessment and the validity of that? You mentioned before we began this interview about the Oral CAT copping a lot of flak.

GW: Yeah. The Oral CAT, I kept out of that, because it wasn't really my business, but we persisted with it. Who was it…

TH: Astrid Wootton.

GW: Astrid Wootton, yeah. She was a key developer of the Oral CAT and initially we thought it wouldn't be externally examined, but then it was brought in line and Penington (Vice Chancellor University of Melbourne) got really cross about it because nothing that was going to get a kid into Melbourne University was going to be assessed by teachers.

TH: Yes! And what do you think his mindset was? I mean, just the kind of exams they had in …

GW: Oh yeah. It was the sort of exams that the English staff at Melbourne University would set for their own pupils.

TH: Oh right, well ...

GW: Undergraduates.

TH: There's a separate history there. That's all changed, of course, over the years, too.

GW: Oh, I'm pleased about that!

TH: Yes, I think there are more 'prompts' than kind of analytical questions around nowadays, and less exams! I hope so, anyway. And the other question about the text response was do you think – I mean, it was only given a brief short life before they killed it, do you think the panel could have kept coming up with a variety of prompts to answer that question about appropriate answers?

GW: Oh yeah. You could put the same prompt in after about three years, and so long as you had a mixture of the used and the new, it wouldn't have affected anybody and kids weren't going to pre-prepare answers on a particular text in a particular response to a particular prompt, if they thought it wasn't going to be there.

TH: What I mean, I imagine each successive exam would have given teachers a teaching strategy about kinds of ways to explore a text.

GW: Yeah.

TH: And, the other question about the text list, is what was your response – you may not have had a response, but to the controversy over putting popular culture texts on, like there's a big controversy about *When the Wind Blows*.

GW: About ...

TH: *When the Wind Blows*, the Raymond Briggs graphic novel that's out.

GW: Oh, fine.

TH: Yes. Well, I certainly thought fine too, but it was very interesting. It took the powers that be 20 years before they actually put another one on, and it was very interesting the way they did it, because they very shrewdly approached Professor Catherine Beavis to write a rationale about the importance of graphic texts as literature and *Maus* has been on now for a couple of years and there's been no controversy.

GW: Yeah.

TH: And, so did you go on thinking about a senior English study after this period, or was that it for you?

GW: That was it. Almost immediately, 1986, 1988, I got put onto the – 1987 – I got put onto the big project for the Curriculum Corporation, what was it …And, I got onto that and that took over my life for a couple of years.

TH: And, did you see any synergy between the work you'd been doing for the Study Design and what could fit into the national curriculum issues?

GW: No. The degree to which teachers were independent and self-directing and resourceful only became clear after the first few months on what was called *A National Guide to Literacy*. But, that had also been the case when we were thinking about the Study Design. Teachers were like that; they were resourceful, they were powerful, and text response was some way of recognising the power of these teachers and their resourcefulness by saying, 'Ok, teach your hearts out, and we won't stamp on your efforts by tying your students down.'

TH: That's a great way of putting it. One of the reasons VATE undertook this project was largely through Brenton Doecke's initiative. He said from what he knows about the history of curriculum reform, this was one of the great periods of English curriculum reform; it's up there with more publicised reforms like productive pedagogies, etcetera. This was a real moment where you got a peculiar kind of coalescence between a profession that, as you said, was resourceful and inventive, but at the time you also had a bit of political will to bring in *Ministerial Paper No. 6*, for example.

GW: Yeah, and you had people in teacher education, teacher preparation, who were like-minded. They were permitting Dip Ed and B.Ed students to be themselves.

TH: You think of people like Margaret Gill and Bernard Newsome (Education, Monash University) and Ian Hansen (Education, The University of Melbourne) and that group of people.

GW: Yeah. And as I said, in another context there'd been a string of visitors from England ...

TH: Wonderful visitors.

GW: … over five years who – and Garth Boomer with language across the curriculum, who'd set up conditions whereby Australian – or Victorian, to a large extent, but no, Australian as well – teacher educators … it wasn't a matter of changing them, it was a matter of engaging their sympathies to such a degree that they wanted to emulate, they wanted to develop what skills they already had, and they were an amazing crowd. And very, very powerful, I think, in getting the profession into the condition it was before the beginning of basic skills testing.

TH: Well, I think the English teaching associations had a role to play, too. I mean, I think one of the subjects of this project is we look at it kind of educating ...

GW: Yeah, AATE, VATE, yeah.

TH: Yeah, they differ.

GW: The national conferences; they're conferences at which visitors were invited.

TH: You're thinking of people like Britton and Barnes and Dixon?

GW: Yeah, yeah. And Nancy Martin.

TH: Yeah, same for people like Graves and Moffett who came over as well. They're all there as influences, I think, in the Study Design. Margaret Gill said that about the work she did on the English Group 1 Writing workshop; there was an easy transfer of that kind of knowledge into the Study Design's Writing folio.

GW: Yeah.

TH: Well, is there anything else you'd like to say about that wonderful, golden moment in education?

GW: The speed with which the forces of reaction has worked in the years since is really quite remarkable. Not only basic skills tests, but the development of a national curriculum, the development of NAPLAN, all those things are just – you know, where are teachers now?

TH: Well, as John Yandell, a very good English UK educator says, with national curriculums good teachers just have to look for cracks in the kind of structure and do the real teaching there, because the actual mandated curriculum doesn't allow much.

GW: Oh, it's nonsense, and as for NAPLAN ...

TH: Shouldn't end this with laughter, but I've actually written a couple of articles where I've said why don't they start interviewing the kids about what they think about NAPLAN, because I can tell you what the kids think! I mean, I've got four grandkids who've all kind of lived through it, and the further into it they go, the more blasé they become about it, because they keep saying, 'What is the point of it? Blah blah blah'. But they can all use the jargon, 'persuasive texts' 'genre', and all that kind of thing. They can all talk it, but they're not interested in it. Unfortunately, there are good schools around that don't let it crack the curriculum in a way, but ...

GW: No, but there are some schools, even state schools, that not only teach to it, but who want the NAPLAN results of would-be entrants to the school.

TH: Dreadful.

GW: That's really, really frightful.

TH: Yes, it is. Anyway, let's end of a kind of more glowing note than the word 'frightful'. Let's trust in the resourcefulness of our teachers and the resilience of kids to progress their education.

GW: We hope.

TH: Well, thanks very much, Graeme. I've really enjoyed talking to you.