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CPL Podcast: New English Syllabus 11-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Jane Sherlock and Deb McPherson

'Writing visits like grace. Its greatest gift is the comfort if not the joy of transformation. In an inspired moment, we almost believe that anguish can be made bearable and injustice can be overturned, because they can be named. And if we're lucky, joy can even be multiplied a hundredfold, so we may have reserves in the cupboard for the lean times.'

- Merlinda Bobis

INTRODUCTION:

You're listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Jane Sherlock and Deb McPherson and we're chatting about what to do with this Stage 6 English Syllabus. Jane, Deb, welcome!

Jane Sherlock & Deb McPherson:

Thank you, and lovely to be here.

Carly Boreland:

You have both spent a lot of time talking, thinking, reading about English over long careers and doing some fabulous CPL courses and conferences for the Teachers Federation and the CPL as well. Can you tell us, Jane, and then Deb, why is English so important to you?

Jane Sherlock:

Well, apart from the fact that I love to read, I really think that English has got so much potential in helping students. I think that in this current world there's never been a more important role than to say "Let's try and make our students more discerning readers and viewers". And of course, we want them to be able to manage that world (which is ever more complex than our world was) because there is a big difference between rich, wonderful language, and "spin" and "vacuous rhetoric", and that worries me, that there is a lot of the spin, a lot of the rhetoric happening. If we can give students the tools to look at the differences, and also to have something else to do in their life (to read and view) not only with a critical eye but with an eye that says, "Oh wow, wasn't that wonderful?"



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Deb McPherson:

Yes, for me Jane, absolutely! English is a way to understand the complexity of the world and everyone needs a hand in helping to understand the human experience. The texts that have been set for this new HSC, there are some marvellous text there to help students through paths of life and to understand what's going on with them, and their relationships with others. So, there's much to enthuse about and much to get excited about, and most importantly, a lot to read and view many times, not just once.

Jane Sherlock:

Actually, that's a really important point because in the time that we've been exploring all of these new texts, some of them we said "oh that's interesting" but we've gone back to them, and some of them we've now read three times. For example, in the *Human Experiences* in the *Common Module*, there's a beautiful novel of "*Past the Shallows*" by the gorgeous Tasmanian writer Favel Parrett, and the more I read it (and I am now up to the third reading) [the more I see]. There is so much about families, about frailties, about the human experience – particular about those paradoxes of how we treat those people we love. And there are some beautiful characters and the boys are genuine teenagers with all the terrible awful things that have happened in their lives. So there's that one, but there's also in the new *Craft of writing* [module], two Colum McCann's [texts] and they're just extraordinary pieces of writing. Also, Catherine Cole's "*Home*" (which at first I wasn't that wrapped by) which looks at these wonderful complexities of a refugee coming to Sydney and not belonging and trying to work out who he is, considering how difficult it is particularly when you're family is not with you. So there are those ones, and of course, we've discovered the Asian poets!

Deb McPherson:

Yes, we have, and I must put my hand up immediately! Last year I said "Look, there are some great poems here but I probably wouldn't do it because of the difficulty of handling a whole range of different poets in one module." But, I was wrong – I was absolutely wrong! I've read them again; I've experienced them again; and I've researched some of the poets – and it's a stunning collection. It works well and I'm sure it will be a great work in the classroom for students to engage with. And I've just felt really excited about the possibilities that *Contemporary Asian Australian poets* offer, right across the spectrum – not just at schools that have a high diversity of students, but to students everywhere, because these are poets (either born in Australia or who have come to Australia with a wide variety of different backgrounds) who offer us fresh eyes on the things that we look at every day, and make us realise the importance of home and the difficulties of being fragmented away from your family or where you came from, and the courage and extraordinary heroism of some of the people who write about those experiences. So, it's a great collection!

Jane Sherlock:

Actually, Deb made the really interesting comment, the other day, that the poets are Asian, but the poems are *not* specifically Asian. So, they really have this universality which is really what literature is all about – that it over time and place, and different cultures and different experiences. But what we've



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also been impressed with about all of these Asian poets is that they have wonderful credentials and are incredibly gifted people in a whole range of fields with amazing backgrounds. The particular collection of the book that's been prescribed is called "*Contemporary Asian Australian Poems*" and there are three introductions.

Deb McPherson:

Yes, yes! And the richness for teachers and students to have a look at these introductions because each person takes a different viewpoint and gives you an insight into the backgrounds of the people involved, but more importantly, into the sophisticated way in which they handle language. I have learnt so much from reading those introductions. Often people skip the introductions, you know "Get to the text and we'll get back to that later", but it's very, very worthwhile to read that.

You know, for me, this new syllabus, the differences I see that are dramatic, and I want to highlight, is Module C. Module C is a whole new ball game for teachers and Module C offers opportunities to take the module that you do in Year 11, the *Reading to Write* module, further because it's like the child of *Reading to Write*. "*Module C – The Craft of Writing*" is really about reading and understanding what writers do and putting that into your own writing. And we've got great text to have a look at.

I'm hearing (Jane's telling me) that teachers have already locked in what particular text they're going to do in Module C and I think "Hang back a little bit. Read them all, read them again and then make your decisions based on the pathway you choose" because there is much to gain from that reflection and thinking about "How could I use this? How could my students use this?" One idea, of course, is to give your students access to as many [of the text] that you possibly can, and not just the two that you're required to engage with, because they all offer so many different opportunities for teachers in the classroom.

Jane Sherlock:

You know George Orwell appears three times in this syllabus.

Deb McPherson:

He does! "*Nineteen Eighty-Four*", of course, a gift to any teacher in any class: to read a novel that actually is almost like an instruction manual (unfortunately) for some of the political ghastliness's that are happening across the world. It's such an eye opener to read it again and to see how prescient he was about what was going to happen in the future and the warning he gives us all, you know "Do something about it".

Jane Sherlock:

So, we've got this wonderful combination of text that actually "*reflect*" and then we've some that "*demonstrate*" the *Craft of Writing*.



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Carly Boreland:

And so can I just ask you then? You guys have dived straight in, when we start talking about the new syllabus, to the texts – and I love that because obviously it drives your passion and it drives why you are teachers and what you are trying to get across to your students. For teachers who are starting to plan (and I know that they’re already trying things with Year 11 and getting ready for Year 12 for 2019), where do they start with the documents? It sounds like a great place to start with the texts: and you get excited about them; and you read about them; and you really get into that. You’ve got most students doing Standard and Advanced, with some students doing Studies (and you want to give them scope to be able to move into Standard if they change their minds later on).

Jane Sherlock:

We also have students doing EAL/D.

Carly Boreland:

Yes, and EAL/D as well. So, we’ve got these documents that are the syllabus; where do we start with those documents? Once we’ve had our initial conversations about the texts, then where do what do we do next?

Jane Sherlock:

One would imagine that a lot of that’s already been done. Because unlike previous syllabuses, *this* particular syllabus, is actually much more prescriptive for Year 11. So, in the past, a lot of people have defaulted to past Areas of Studies where they may have done “*Belonging*” or “*Change*” or “*Journeys*” but that’s changed. So the actual first module (which is also prescribed) is this new one which is going to look at *Reading to Write* – which is fantastic because that’s what it’s about – it’s about reading a whole lot of texts in order to help students become better writers (and I’ve heard there are some terrific things that are happening, at the moment in schools, where they’re exploring a whole different range of text). And then, of course, they’ll move into (depending on the course they are doing) Module A, and Module B (which is pretty much the same because it’s a *close*, or it’s a *critical*, study).

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask you on that, what are the key things to watch out for?

Jane Sherlock:

It’s easy to think that this new syllabus is going to be the same as the old one. But there are some real fundamental changes to the structure, particularly to the assessment system. It’s absolutely vital that you keep on reading the documents, checking the NESA site, because every week you will see there are more documents coming through. In the past, we used to have the syllabus in one single document; now, it’s in a separate document for each subject. And also there have been some changes made to the assessment. For example, The *Craft of Writing* initially said it was a “maximum of 25%” and now it just says “25%”, so just be careful that you are up to date with the actual documents. I would suggest that



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you download the documents, and have them there, so you are making sure that you are actually looking at the current edition.

Deb McPherson:

I would date them. I wouldn't actually print them out because the danger (unless you were going to have a stand-alone collection of documents that are notated) is you have got to go into NESAs *every time* you want to look at your documents and check the date on which you downloaded and the date that's now been presented on the website.

Carly Boreland:

Can I suggest to people too that a newsletter that you can subscribe to with NESAs (and I *strongly* recommend that everyone does that) and whenever they make any change (and often they are quite small changes but often with assessments they have *big* impact) they send that out in a newsletter. That way you can make sure (rather than having to always go yourself and check it up) you can get those as they become available as well.

Jane Sherlock:

So obviously the documents are important. It's also important to unpack the rubric so you know exactly what they're talking about, and then of course, the textual choices. And I know a lot of schools (because we've done a few surveys) have already chosen their texts. And I know a lot of people would choose the texts because they already have them in their book room (and that's absolutely a crucial decision) or it's something they know and you don't want to be re-inventing the wheel all the time. There will be something that is probably familiar in one of these modules – hopefully there will be something familiar so you're not doing everything that's totally new.

Deb McPherson:

It's a bit like a new marriage – something old and something new (I don't know about something blue!), but it really is important not to overload yourself. It's also important to see the riches that are there and make sure you avail yourself of some of them. You don't want to have just boiled eggs at the wedding breakfast; you want to have some pretty exciting stuff as well for the students you're going to teach.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:

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Jane Sherlock:

That comes back to Module C because while you may have already locked yourself in, for various reasons, to the key prescribed texts, you may not have needed to have locked yourself into the Module



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C. We really believe that, even though NESA say two [texts], we believe that more than two will work – because some of them are quite slight, some of them look at the *Craft of Writing* rather than “modelling” the craft. And so the more that students can be exposed to the range of writing that either enhances or enrich or affirms or challenges, or is a completely different voice, and particularly if you haven’t dipped your foot yet into the wonderful world of Asia and literature, that the poems are a good place to do that in (in the *Craft of Writing*) because there are two poems, one is for Standard and one is for Advanced. Also, the richness of the Indigenous culture and society to explore.

Deb McPherson:

And as an example, Ali Cobby Eckerman’s poems are beautiful and confronting and, seemingly simple, but when you start looking at them, they are much more complex than you might have thought and offer quite a lot to students in the classroom – her story is amazing.

Jane Sherlock:

The back story of course is going to be crucial and I think, to every student who will be doing [Ali’s] poetry – there will be a lot of students doing her poetry from her beautiful collection called “*Inside My Mother*”. Last year she won the most prestigious poetry award in the world at Yale University. And her story is compelling about having been taken away from her mother and brought up by adoptive parents and then finding her mother at 34 and looking at her mother she said, “This person had the same eyes as me.” There is the anguish and joy, but, also the pain and the suffering that went up to that point, all sorts of issues that she was trying to confront, and so she’s used poetry to explore her own feelings, identity and culture. So, [these poems] work absolutely wonderfully for Standard Module A.

Deb McPherson:

And once again, a poet that repays re-reading – in fact *all* poets really pay re-reading – but it’s especially important in those two selections because they’re some of the new material on the list and it’s really important to give them a fair chance in your considerations for what you’re going to teach in the classroom.

Jane Sherlock:

And there’s so much rich material you could use as well as that, because we have the wonderful speech by Linda Burney (her first speech to the Federal Parliament) but we also have some fabulous images that are around now that are exploring Indigenous society and culture. This is *the* time to be looking at that particular cross-curriculum priority of Indigenous Australia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia – I think this is the best time to be doing both of those things.

Carly Boreland:

I wanted to ask you too about the other choices. I’m a History teacher and we’ve got a world of options and choices. There are some choices where people in English can take one or two paths – I’m thinking about contemporary possibilities, poetry, and novels. Is that right?



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Deb McPherson:

It all depends on which pathway you choose. You've got a certain number of texts to select in Standard and a certain number to select in Advanced, and it's important to choose a pathway that meets the requirement recommendations. And it pays us to make sure that people understand the importance of following the requirements for the HSC. You don't want to have students getting into the exam and having the wrong set of texts, so it's really important to use the planner that the document supplies you with which gives you very clear outline of what's required. Perhaps we could just go through that very quickly.

Jane Sherlock:

Yes. In Standard, for example, we have a reduction in the number of prescribed texts which, one would imagine, is not going to overload the year too much. With the Standard students, they have to do three. *Prose fiction* is compulsory for everybody, and then they can choose between *Poetry* and *Drama*, then the third text can be *Non-Fiction*, or *Film*, or *Media*, and then at least two texts from Module C. If you're doing Advanced, *Shakespearean Drama* is compulsory and *Prose Fiction* is compulsory, and *Poetry* or *Drama*, and then *Non-Fiction*, *Film* or *Media*, or one of the categories above. So there will be, for example in Module A, there is a pair of two poems (two poets) and two novels which we haven't had before but you could double up on those if you've covered the other requirements. EAL/D have three prescribed texts, *Prose Fiction*, *Poetry* or *Drama*, *Non-Fiction* or *Film* or *Media*. Extension One – it is a different kind of approach – because they have to do an *Extended Print Text*, another *Extended Print Text* and third text of their choice (which will be dependent on their particular elective).

[Carly], you were saying about *Contemporary Possibilities*. That's in Year 11 and is about exploring a range of texts (particularly digital) that are doing something in a different way. The *Contemporary Possibilities* is really the key link of making sure that students are exposed to this new way of navigating a website, or a book, or a podcast – those sorts of situations. The number of electives within the Modules has changed – so the modules are still there but there are text choices within those. And of course it's about where your kids are at. I know we (the teachers) like to say "I just absolutely love Ted Hughes; I have to use Ted Hughes!" But have a look and ask "Is that where your kids are at?" because they're the people we're trying to engage (*we've* already been engaged, that's why we're English teachers – because we love literature); it's about getting your kids engaged and the textual choices, particularly in Year 11, where you can be playing with a whole lot of wonderful material.

Deb McPherson:

But back to the *Common Module* because that is a really interesting one as it goes across *three* of the English courses, so it's like an "anchor stone" in the syllabus. I'm really interested in the rubric that teachers and students must engage with because remember, you're looking at the text through the lens of the rubric, and that's really important – you might love a text and spend a whole lot of time on it, but without engaging with the rubric, you'll be misleading your students. So, it's really important to



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consider some of the things that are in the rubric and then once you've had a look at that, have a look at the text you think will best deliver for your students in the classroom.

Jane Sherlock:

It's a pretty straight forward rubric too because at the moment the *Discovery Rubric* is massive – it could be mined for the next ten years for questions because it's such a dense rubric.

Deb McPherson:

Because *all* questions come from the rubric. That's really important to remember. If you're going to be looking for what's going to be in that exam, it must have its genesis in the rubric.

Carly Boreland:

It's important to point that out because sometimes there's just assumed knowledge that all teachers have, but if you're new to these things [you may not know].

Jane Sherlock:

Well the rubric at the moment, for example *Discovery*, absolutely drives *Paper One* (that's three sections of it!) and the same thing are going to happen with other papers. So, there's going to be the *Unseen Text* where students will still have to read an unseen text in a range of different forms and answer short questions, but it'll all be about the *Human Experiences* – it might be about the anomalies or inconsistencies in human behaviour; or it might be about how we use literature as a frame for telling our own story that the narrative of the particular image, or the narrative of the poem, or the narrative of the extract. So, if we look at – “what are the human qualities? What are the emotions that arise from all of these experiences?” The more you normalise that language and the more you incorporate it into your daily lexicon with the students, then *they* can see what we mean by the paradoxes of the human experience.

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask you about other “go to” places for good resources? So, we've got these new syllabuses, we've got all the texts (and a lot of those I understand you can access free on the internet).

Jane Sherlock:

Well, you can for a lot of the Module Cs, yes. And that's important that teachers get as many as they can and read them and talk about them in the classroom and say “What's going to work?”, and not locking themselves into it. Also, if you have more than one class, they don't all have to be doing the same Module C's either, and some student choice I think would work really well. There are all the CPL courses, specifically the English courses, of course.

Carly Boreland:

And smash hit conferences!



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Jane Sherlcok:

Absolutely! And of course the English Teachers Association, whom I have a lot to do with, have some fabulous resources out there at the moment, and they are actually working on them as well – courses and resources. NESA has put out resources. DET have put out resources. There are fewer commercial companies doing it these days – so it’s really is a matter of keeping your eyes out and having a look at what’s going on.

Deb McPherson:

And because a lot of the texts that we’re looking at (a number of which are new), the use of the internet in terms of a search under “review” is really helpful.

I’m in love with “*Hag-seed*”, the wonderful combination with “*The Tempest*”. Margaret Atwood has used “*The Tempest*” as her appropriation (in the wonderful idea from Hogarth Press) to actually ask well known authors to take a Shakespearian play and do something with it (whatever their hearts desired) and Margaret Atwood saw “*The Tempest*” as a series of prisons.

She’s taken this wonderful novel, “*Hag-seed*”, and given us humour, and life, and vitality and a great understanding of “*The Tempest*”, so that once you’ve read “*Hag-seed*” it takes you back to “*The Tempest*” with such fresh eyes again.

Here’s a situation, in “*Hag-seed*”, where Margaret Atwood has a Director, who has been removed from his position and usurped, goes into a prison and starts taking the prisoners through Shakespearian plays. So he takes them through “*The Tempest*”. One of his wonderful rules is you can’t swear in this but you can use the insults in the play anytime you wish to insult somebody else. So [the prisoners] are *ripping* through the play trying to find the huge number of insults that are there and available to them! There’s a lovely sense of humour in it as well as the reality of being in a prison institution, the Fletcher County Correctional Centre, and she weaves in this wonderful story of revenge and lots and lots of laughs too, and great techniques to use in the classroom.

One of the things that Margaret Atwood does is she gets her Director character, Felix, to ask the prisoners “What would life be like after the end of ‘*The Tempest*?’” So they write their epilogues for all these different characters. Of course, [the prisoners] identify very strongly with Caliban (you know, they all think they *are* Caliban) and they want to write a musical about Caliban because he’s imprisoned and he’s forced down and oppressed, and that’s how they feel very often. So they write a hip hop style musical and what life was like for him after the end of “*The Tempest*”. I love the start of one of the raps; and they call themselves *The Hag-seeds* (the group), because “Hag-seed” is an insult based on being the spawn of a witch):

*Ban-ban, Ca-Caliban,
Don't need no master, I am not your man!
So stuff it up your hole, gimme back what you stole,
Tellin' you it's late, I'm fillin' up with rage,*



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I'm gettin' all set to go on a ram-page!

How much fun can you have with a novel? And of course, Margaret Atwood's having a huge amount of fun, and *it is* great to have that as a classroom text, I think.

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask you (because both of your *read* so wonderfully and you bring those words on the page to life), in class, would you give students the opportunity to try and deliver with that kind of text?

Jane Sherlock:

Honestly, oral reading is a skill, and not everybody has it, and not everyone can learn it. Think about when you want to read to your children or read to your elderly parents, or read to anybody, it is such a wonderful skill to have. I think that we sometimes underrate reading to students. It's important to read to students because it's about fluency, they hear the correct pronunciation and they enjoy it. Also, [the students] can be reading aloud (not reading around the classroom – absolutely not!) in small groups where they're going to feel a lot more at ease with “playing” with [words].

Recognise also [though], it's not everybody's skill. I know that with my own students I used to make sure that the ones who liked doing it we would involve them all the time (sometimes they could be the most wonderful people and sometimes you've got some kids who do drama, or are really clever at that sort of thing) because expressive reading is really important.

Deb McPherson:

One of the Module C text is “*Picture a Vacuum*” by the magnificent performance poet Kate Tempest. Her poetry is available on CD, or you can see her doing her poetry in a YouTube clip, or you can actually buy it as a written text. And when you buy the written text, it says on the very first page, “Meant to be read aloud.” so, she's absolutely instructing, teachers and students, “This is not to be looked at on a page – you've got to stand up, speak up and say this!”

Jane Sherlock:

Just going back, Carly, to that point that you said about some “go to”; I'm a great user of going to the image, particularly for a play. If you put into Google Images the play “*Wil*”, you would get a whole lot of images of various productions throughout the world. Now, if you then click on the source of that image, it'll take you to a review of perhaps a New York production, or it can be an image from a production in Britain, for example, and that will give you a review that may give you some fantastic pieces of information.

Deb McPherson:

And that makes me think about when we do our conferences. We spend a lot of time looking for appropriate images that will enrich the understandings that we've gained. And one of funny



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serendipitous things that happens with that (when you find an image and then you go to the page on which that image is) sometimes you'll find the most amazing resources that you would never have found if you hadn't just been on this sort of search for finding good pictures. I find that amazing!

Jane Sherlock:

The other day I was interviewing some Extension 2 students and this girl was telling me that her best source of information is the bibliography of somebody else's writing because it helps you to mine deeper, and I think images do that. I know it's time consuming (and I know that Deb and I have more time than teachers in the classroom) but sometimes it is very, very useful to go into the images and keep mining down. And also, kids love to see what these people will look like. So, there are so many images. For example if you're going to do Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, there are so many books about the two of them, there's a lot around there.

Deb McPherson:

And also, shakespearereloaded.edu.au (which is a marvellous website that Doctor Jackie Manuel is involved in) is a tremendously important site to go and see for good teaching strategies, as well as materials and information on plays.

Carly Boreland:

There's a wonderful expression that "the future still belongs to those who command the written and the spoken word" and chatting with you today, I think our future is in fabulous hands. Thank you Jane and Deb – it's been wonderful having you here and we so look forward to seeing you at our conferences and courses in the future.

Deb McPherson:

Thank you. And to all English teachers everywhere, oh boy, what a job you've got! And it's a fantastic job! Don't be disheartened by the amount of work that you have to do this year because the results in your classrooms will be an extraordinary affirmation of the great job you do.

Jane Sherlock:

Yes! And I think too, thanks to the Federation and the CPL and the JPL, because this really is about extending this whole idea about professional learning, and there is so much out there but you can really depend on what the Federation is doing with their various courses. Know that you're not alone; the CPL is here for you, that the JPL is there to be read, and the Federation is always there to support us.

Deb McPherson:

Yes; that our union is giving us that professional development that is so much a part of being a strong and important part of society.



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Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Editor of the JPL. I've been talking with Jane Sherlock and Deb McPherson about introducing the new Stage 6 English syllabuses. And to find out more, and to listen to further podcasts, you can go to our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers only, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Jane Sherlock is a reader, author, experienced presenter and English teacher. She was the Head Teacher of English at Kiama and currently is the NSW English Teachers' Association project officer for the HSC student days. She is part of the CPL team delivering quality teacher education to union members as well as lecturing and tutoring at tertiary institutions. In 2009 Jane received the Australian College of Educators award for her contribution to education.

Deb McPherson is a reader, author and lover of books. She is an English teacher who has spent 30 years as a classroom teacher, Head Teacher, Deputy, BOS Curriculum Officer and DET Manager of English as well as lecturing and tutoring at tertiary institutions. She spent many years on the committee selecting the HSC texts.