Thanks Jackie for inviting me to speak to you this afternoon. The wisest piece of advice I can give you today, is to listen carefully to what Jackie has to say. And, perhaps just as importantly, take note of how she teaches. Those of you who have been taught by her don’t need me to tell you about her knowledge, her passion for English, and her wonderful capacity to practise what she preaches about teaching and learning.

The second piece of advice I would offer you is to be confident that you should leave this university better prepared to teach English in secondary schools than any generation before you. You will probably know more about the Years 7 to 10 and Years 11 to 12 HSC English syllabuses, the research and scholarship that underpins contemporary English curricula, an extensive variety of ways in which English can be taught, what HSC examiners are looking for in students’ scripts, and many other things, than do quite a few of your future colleagues in English staff rooms. Yes, you will need to learn on the job many tricks of the trade. Yes, you will have to work out how to best manage kids’ learning. Yes, you will probably hear the odd wail or three “didn’t they teach you at uni how to control kids in the classroom?” Yes, there will be times when you feel like this. But as you acquire experience you will soon pick up those practices of rat cunning – or should I say the cunning of a fox – to deal with tricky situations.

I guess I should fill in my background after my fourteen years as a secondary school classroom English and History teacher. From 1979 to 1990 I was an academic at the University of New England where I was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts, and Chair of the Teacher Education Program in the Faculty of Education. In 1990 and 1991 I was the Consultant Advisor on the personal staff of the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment Education and Training, John Dawkins, with responsibility for a number of national policy issues – especially, the construction of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy; the development of a national curriculum K-10; and pre-service teacher education. Since 1996, I have been a Senior Executive in the NSW Department of Education and Training where I am now the Director of Research and Development in the Office of the Director-General. But I will probably always see myself first and foremost as a teacher of English.
You probably know already that our wonderful profession of English teaching seems to generate a fair bit of controversy. Personally, I am sick of all the nonsense about the Literacy Wars, the Cultural Wars, and all of that miserable stuff which hopefully will go the way of one of its principal warriors, John Winston Howard. As an English teacher you will need to exercise all of those critical faculties – particularly those of enlightened idealism and informed scepticism – that are at the heart of any decent university education. A properly educated person is able to be enthusiastic without descending into gibberish idolatry; and is able to question carefully without descending into bleak cynicism.

Throughout my 40 years in education I have too often found myself defending teachers and students from wild allegations about declining literacy standards. In doing so, I have found myself drawing upon the knowledge and skills of intellectual inquiry that I acquired at this university.

Indeed, the first paragraph I ever had published in book form a couple of months after commencing my academic career, following 14 years in the classroom and 10 years on the HSC English Syllabus Committee went as follows:

After sex, religion and politics no topic is more likely to produce hysterical controversy than the “great literacy debate”. Unfortunately the characteristic features of this debate are usually polemics, prejudice, gross generalising and ignorance of what scholarship and research have to say on such immensely important issues.

Now, 28 years - and umpteen books, articles, and conference papers later, I find little has changed. Only last month I published an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* rebutting the latest perpetrator of doom and gloom, an economist at ANU, Dr Andrew Leigh, by exposing the weakness of the data that he used and the flaws in his methodology. I won’t go over that territory now, because I think that Jackie will be making my article available to you on the AELE website.

To put some historical perspective on this, let me take you on a brief trip back in time. In NSW in 1951 there was an even greater media-blitzed hullabaloo about alleged decline in standards of English than that generated by Dr Leigh.

The Sydney newspapers expressed shock and outrage at the presumed scandal. One of the central figures was the then Professor of English at this University, Alec Mitchell, Chief Examiner/Chairman of the English Syllabus Committee. In his report to the Board of Secondary School Studies Professor Mitchell fulminated about a crushing collapse in the performance of the 1951 Leaving Certificate students. Mitchell alleged that, compared with the 1950 candidacy and “pass mark”, nearly 50% of all metropolitan candidates and about 25% of all non-metropolitan candidates should have failed English in 1951. He informed his Board colleagues that in order to enable the proportion of the candidature required by the Board to “Pass” the examination, he and his committee had had to lower the pass mark of 44% in 1950, to 40% in 1951.
In his report to his colleagues on the Board, Professor Mitchell was adamant about the disastrous situation facing everyone. There could be only two possible explanations for the 1951 literacy crisis, said Mitchell: “the performance of the candidates and the effectiveness of the teaching”.

All sorts of ‘reasons’ for this apparently disastrous result were proffered by Mitchell and his colleagues on the Board of School Studies. They included assertions such as that country teachers were more dedicated than city teachers; that fewer students than ever had studied History (in fact, the very opposite was later proved to be the case); that because of the introduction of what Mitchell referred to as the new ‘non-academic’ schools for girls known as Domestic Home Science schools, a “weaker” candidacy had joined the cohort in 1951 (in fact, the average mark in English of all students at these schools was higher than the State average). Similar claims were made about the products of Technical High Schools for boys. Subsequently all of these assertions fell apart.

R. G. (Phil) Price, who was Director of Secondary Education and was the lone member of the Board in any way to contest Mitchell’s sweeping allegations, suggested that the city students were more susceptible than their country cousins to the distractions of the wireless, “with its ready choice of serials and hit parades to which the children become addicted at an early age”.

The errors of all these assumptions and assertions were subsequently exposed by the research of the then relatively junior officer with the Department of Education, Dr (later, Sir) Harold Wyndham who later became Director-General of Education in NSW and leader of the most profound and far reaching reform of NSW school education in the twentieth century. Wyndham undertook a comprehensive analysis of the marking records of the ten markers (6 of them were academics on Mitchell’s staff at the University of Sydney) who marked the 1951 Leaving Certificate English examination.

Wyndham found that two of the ten markers had enormous discrepancies in their marking. One, a freshly appointed academic had marked very generously. He marked about 73% of the non-metropolitan candidates and his average mark was around 16 out of 20. At the other end of the spectrum, a very experienced ‘tougher’ female marker had marked about 75% of the metropolitan students and her average mark was around 11 out of 20. Once Wyndham made the appropriate statistical corrections to counter these marker biases, not only was there no significant difference between the 1950 and the 1951 Leaving Certificate English results; there was also no significant difference between the metropolitan and non-metropolitan candidates in 1951. The allegation of melt down literacy crisis was a complete furphy.
What was to drive the English curriculum in NSW for the next decade was not, however, Wyndham’s expose of the false interpretation of the 1951 exam results - but Mitchell’s paper and the enthusiastic response to it by his colleagues on both the English Syllabus Committee and the Board of Secondary School Studies. Because of the presumed ‘crisis’ of 1951, the Board decided to add a second Leaving Certificate examination (up until then students had sat for only one English examination paper in the Leaving Certificate) focussing specifically upon English usage, expression and comprehension and thereby redress the ‘‘serious weakness in written expression’ revealed in the Chief Examiner Reports in English and ‘most subjects’’. It also resolved to completely rewrite the 1944 English Syllabus. The new syllabus replaced its predecessor in 1953.

Wyndham’s report was tabled at the Board’s meeting in November, 1952. But this report was not presented to the Board until after the 1953 Syllabus had been completed and was never, at any stage, considered by the English Syllabus Committee. Nor did it ever enter the public domain. Both the additional examination and the new syllabus came into operation in 1953. The foundations were built on the sands of absurdity.

So, the point of the story? Be on your critical guard whenever you hear wild swingeing allegations about English. Look for the data. Question the research. Maybe even use the mantra that Coleridge used to declaim to his university students in his lectures on Shakespeare. He would urge his students, when they were looking at any piece of text, whether literary or discursive, to ask themselves the question “why is it thus, and not otherwise?” Why do you think the author chose to use these words and not other words? If the text is advancing an argument, why is the author pursuing this argument in that way. And so on.

Now let me turn to the main part of my presentation.

As I reflect over the state of English in education today it seems to me to be the right time to take a fresh perspective on the territory we now inhabit and to explore the new territories excitingly opened up to us by new knowledge as well as by and through creative and innovative technologies. To reinvigorate with imagination, creativity and some bravery our future pathways as lovers and teachers of English in the first decade of the twenty first century - which seems so vulnerable to the functionalist allure of limiting the scope of our world of English educators merely to that of basic literacy.

To the siren songs of so called pragmatists who see little value in literature, drama, the creative arts, and so on within a world of technological sophistication and instant satisfaction. And to the trivialisation of teaching learning and assessment when measurement is too often reduced to the narrow confines of what can be slickly and neatly determined by standardised, tick-a-box testing. And, as you know, we have established in our Faculty the Arts, English, Literacy, Education – or AELE – Research Network to advance these very goals. I presume that Jackie has already shown you how to access the AELE website.
A few years ago, a very experienced English teaching mate of mine said to me “Brocky the necessary focus on the teaching of literacy in our schools is all very well and good. But I reckon that the emphasis on the teaching of literacy may actually be harming the teaching of English in our schools.” I myself have also become increasingly worried in recent years about the extent to which the basic literacy imperative and the English curriculum agendas have been seen to be synonymous by many. But they are not.

The love, study, and experiencing of the English curriculum in all its richness and diversity - including poetry, novels, short stories, biographies and autobiographies, drama, film, other visual texts, students’ own imaginative, discursive, creative and other forms of text production - across all of the modes of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing - is inclusive of but vastly more expansive than what is commonly considered to be functional or basic literacy.

So, while it is important to acknowledge the overlapping territories of English as a subject or discipline, and literacy across the curriculum - it is as equally important to acknowledge the differences. Just as Mathematics is inclusive of but far broader in scope and depth than numeracy, so too is English inclusive of but far broader in scope and depth than literacy. Therefore, while it is absolutely essential that every student acquires the skills of basic literacy, it is also absolutely essential that the concept and the teaching of the subject English goes well beyond such parameters!

I won’t elaborate on how English is so richly defined in the NSW Board of Studies Syllabuses. I’m sure that Jackie and her university colleagues will cover the syllabuses most comprehensively. And I imagine that Don Carter, the Board of Studies Inspector for English, will have traversed some of that territory last week. But I just want to quote two paragraphs from the HSC English Syllabus which has as its aim:

…to enable students to understand, use, enjoy and value the English language in its various textual forms and to become thoughtful, imaginative and effective communicators in a diverse and changing society….

Meaning is central to the study of English. The study of English makes explicit the language forms and processes of meaning. English Stage 6 develops this by encouraging students to explore, critically evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of the texts of Australian and other societies, in various forms and media, including multimedia. (Stage 6, Years 11-12, Syllabus, page 7).
The whole secondary English Curriculum from Year 7 to Year 12 engages both students and teachers across a massive spectrum including reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing – with students not only being responders to language, but generators of language. In all cases, across all contexts, and for all purposes, meaning is at the centre. Incidentally, on the matter of students’ writing, for example, we need to recognise that this generation of students writes more than any other generation before it – when you take account of all of the out-of-school writing via sms, emails, blogs, MySpace, Bebo, Facebook and so on.

English is a discipline which should be distinguished by – among other things – deep knowledge based on splendid scholarship and research, informed eclecticism, richness of content and purpose, engagement of students and challenging them to do their very best, and freedom from faddism and ideological bandwagons. For example, when ‘functional grammar’ or ‘systemic linguistics’ went beyond being one of a number of powerful intellectual tools with which to critique texts to becoming in some instances, something like a dogmatic creed – it weakened its value.

As in all our decisions to help our students learn and develop, we need a judicious blending of enlightened commitment; wise enthusiasm; healthy scepticism; assured conservation of what is of ongoing value and validity from the past; firm resistance to any snake-oil, quick-fix miracle remedies that might be touted in the present; and firm rejection of wildly exaggerated prognostications about the future. And this is exactly what good teachers of English do day after day, often with little public recognition.

I have a saying that goes like this: “As public educators committed to helping our students now and for the future, we should cherish and conserve the best of our past, and junk or transform the rest as we engage with the present and prepare for the future!”

I have always tried to take a balanced view on matters of Education. It is so easy for people to be seduced by the black or white extremism resulting from what the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called “the either/or fallacy”. Because of my commitment to a balanced view to things, I fear that sometimes the pendulum hanging between those two interdependent and necessary components of teaching and learning on one ‘side’ and its assessment and testing on the other ‘side’ - might swing too much away from the teaching and learning interdependent ‘side’. What is necessary is rarely ever sufficient!

Over 20 years ago, one of my closest friends and a truly brilliant teacher of English in schools and universities, the late Mike Hayhoe, a colleague of mine when I was the Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Education at the University of East Anglia in the UK, handed me a poem given to him by an elderly teacher in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is called “The Lesson”, based on the famous “Beatitudes” speech of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of St. Matthew.
Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering
Them around him he taught them saying

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are the meek
Blessed are they that mourn
Blessed are the merciful
Blessed are they who thirst for justice
Blessed are all the concerned
Blessed are you when persecuted
Blessed are you when you suffer
Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven
Try to remember what I’m telling you

Then Simon Peter said - Will this count?
And Andrew said - Will we have a test on it?
And James said - When do we have to know it for?
And Phillip said - How many words?
And Bartholemew said - Will I have to stand up in front of the others?
And John said - The other disciples didn’t have to learn this
And Matthew said - How many marks do we get for it?
And Judas said - What is it worth?
And the other disciples likewise.

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked
To see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus
His terminal objectives in the cognitive domain

And Jesus wept.

Another recurring irritant to me is a fixation on form at the expense of substance; and
functionalism to the detriment of the imagination. As teachers of English we must
exorcise ourselves from the curse of privileging form over meaning; of preferring shape
over substance; of relying on the formulaic at the expense of the creative; of confusing
the sum of atomised parts with the organic wholeness of experience.

How often have we seen those wanting to assess writing, which is so often the product of
hard, slogging work in drafting and redrafting, by use of the quick fix, resort to the lowest
common denominator, the slick, the slack, the tick-a-box, the formulaic? Splendid
teachers of English have had to negotiate this terrain quite often.

Sensitivity to the power of language is a fundamental ‘weapon’ in the ‘armoury’ of
English educators. For example, one of my hobby horses is an insistence that as
educators we need to go well beyond what is ‘necessary’. To defer to Aristotle, ‘it is
necessary but not sufficient’.
Similarly, I don’t support bald unqualified expressions like “teachers need pedagogical skills to be effective teachers”. They need a lot more than this. They need to address the needs, interests, capacities, talents, and values of our students. They need deep knowledge and understanding of the intellectual substance of what they are teaching. They need to be imaginative and creative in helping their students engage in learning. They need to enjoy working with young people and to be able to engage, indeed empathise, with them. They need to embody the very values that we as educators profess, and other qualities as well. And, of course, they need high quality pedagogical skills.

Shakespeare superbly captures this essential truth about necessity in *King Lear*, Act II Scene IV, where Lear haggles with his two wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan. Now homeless, throneless, and desperate, Lear begs that one of them might allow him and his full retinue of servants to live in either of their castles. Then a Dutch auction proceeds with each of the sisters forcing Lear to lower his expectations of the number of servants he would be allowed to bring. Eventually, Goneril asks Lear why would he now need 25 servants. Or even 15 servants.

In a magnificent speech commencing with “O reason not the need” Lear rails against the enforced lowering of human aspiration to mere necessity.

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is as cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady:
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm……..
*(King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 4, lines 263-269)

If we were to wear clothes only to keep warm, then hessian would do. If we ate merely to stay alive, then bread water and a few vegies is all that would be needed. If we need housing just to shelter us from the wind and the rain, then the most simple hovel with a roof over it is all that we would need.

Our human aspirations - with all their material, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, physical and emotional domains – cannot be restricted merely to meeting the subsistent necessities of basic survival.

The trouble with being satisfied with students’ “needs” is that this can quickly become being satisfied with merely lowest common denominator expectations. Becoming satisfied with, and becoming accountable for, only basic skills.
Excellent teachers of English practise what they preach. One of my favourite maxims comes from Chaucer’s description of the “poure persoun” - the humble and dutiful country priest whom we meet in *The Canterbury Tales*: “first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte”. To teach English effectively, we need to be exemplary users of the language: to read widely and critically; to write with flair, imagination, accuracy, and lucidity; to speak with clarity, verve and wit; to listen and view with acumen and discrimination.

Excellent English teachers encourage their students to engage with and respond to the potentially exciting range of types of texts – imaginative, everyday, poetic, functional, discursive, classical, rhetorical, visual, multi-media, autobiographical, and so on. They understand the key roles played by purpose, sense of audience, reflexivity over earlier drafting, and what used to be called ‘point of view’, when both creating and critiquing meaning expressed through language. They don’t succumb to narrowly based ideologies or populist fads. Their teaching is not characterised by dreary, sterile ‘busy work’.

Exemplary teachers of English are multi-skilled and intelligently eclectic in their theoretical knowledge and practical strategies. But exemplary teachers of English strategically apply their knowledge and utilise methodologies according to how they judge them to be appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their students and according to the classroom contexts within which they are teaching.

A child’s education must not be screwed up by any rigid imposition of grid references from any particular ideological map. Nearly a century ago the great American educator John Dewey urged educators never to “mistake the map for the territory”. How often, for example, has the marvellous ‘territory’ of children’s and adolescent literature been stultified by formulaic teaching practices bent merely on ‘mapping’ bits and compiling lists?

How many kids, for example, have been turned off literature by the appalling ways in which it has sometimes been taught, with some teachers hell-bent on insisting that their students feverishly quarry out metaphors, similes, personification, onomatopoeia and so on? Or on dissecting the text to illustrate some features of a bland checklist of characteristics based on somebody’s literary or linguistic theory?

How often has the beauty or complexity or simplicity or emotion of literature been smashed and minced by ridiculous straight-jacketing by some teachers determined to reduce everything to atomised bits?

How often has the relentless pursuit of separated little boxes of plot, character, theme and so on ruined the experience of reading of novels? Or worse? How many novels have been slaughtered by a teacher demanding a summary of every single chapter in a 20, 30, or even 40 chapter novel? How many plays have been massacred by teachers who seem to forget that the text is there to be enacted: to be explored within a whole range of possible dramatic presentations?
In an era that perhaps places too much heavy emphasis on functional and expository writing, those of us who love literature and have a passion for sharing this with others, know the truth about the quintessential power of “narrative” about which Barbara Hardy wrote so eloquently over four decades ago in *Towards a Poetics Fiction*.

My argument is that narrative, like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order to experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life………..

I take for granted the ways in which storytelling engages our interest, curiosity, fear, tensions, expectation, and sense of order. What concern me here are the qualities which fictional narrative shares with that inner and outer storytelling that plays a major role in our sleeping and walking lives. For we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.

In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

Throughout most of the latter half of the 20th Century – and, at certain times and within certain contexts, before then – the issues associated with the relationship between the writer, the text and the reader have occupied the focus of English teachers, scholars, and curriculum framers. Perhaps the best book addressing these issues *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* was written in 1978 by that remarkable woman Louise Rosenblatt who had written her seminal book *Literature as Exploration* 40 years earlier, in 1938. This remarkable scholar died only three years ago in 2005 at the age of 100.

For Rosenblatt, the ‘reader’ is the person reading what she calls the ‘text’. The ‘poem’ is the resulting meaning that the ‘reader’ arrives at from the interaction between herself/himself the ‘reader’ and the words in the ‘text’.

In the literary debates before and after Rosenblatt, there has been a spectrum of judgment which has had, at one end, the empiricist assertion that the meaning that the reader ought to take away from an engagement with a text is obvious, incontestable, and entirely outside the realms of speculation and context. At the other end of the spectrum have been those who adopted an almost extreme position of relativism – such as was expressed by Stanley Fish in his earlier (but not later) writings, and some poststructuralists: whereby the meaning of the text was completely constructed by the reader, according to a potential plethora of contextual determinants.
I find myself in agreement with the stance taken by the contemporary Italian intellectual and author Umberto Eco in his splendid book *On Literature*: first published in Italian in 2002 and then translated into English in 2005.

Reading works of literature forces on us an exercise of fidelity and respect, albeit within a certain freedom of interpretation. There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true. Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be moved by a profound respect for what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text.

On one hand the world seems to be a “closed” book, allowing of only one reading. If, for example, there is a law governing planetary gravitation, then it is either the right one or the wrong one. Compared with that, the universe of a book seems to us to be an open universe. But let us try to approach a narrative work with common sense and compare the assumptions we can make about it with those we can make about the world. As far as the world is concerned, we find that the laws of universal gravitation are those established by Newton, or that it is true that Napoleon died on Saint Helena on 5 May 1821.

And yet, if we keep an open mind, we will always be prepared to revise our convictions the day science formulates the great laws of the cosmos differently, or a historian discovers unpublished documents proving that Napoleon died on a Bonapartist ship as he attempted to escape. On the other hand, as far as the world of books is concerned, propositions like “Sherlock Holmes was a bachelor”. “Little Red Riding-Hood is eaten by the wolf and then freed by the woodcutter”, or “Anna Karenina commits suicide” will remain true for eternity, and no one will ever be able to refute them. There are people who deny that Jesus was the son of God, others who doubt His historical existence, others who claim He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and still others who believe that the Messiah is yet to come, and however we might think about such questions, we treat these opinions with respect. But there is little respect for those who claim that Hamlet married Ophelia, or that Superman is not Clark Kent. (p. 5)

What I myself have learned is that the meanings of texts - or, to put it in Rosenblatt’s terms, the ‘poems’ - that I have cherished ever since my days here at Sydney University have changed over time as my experience of life has developed and changed. I have waged no violence upon the texts. Nor have I rejected as immature those meanings which I arrived at when reading those texts at an earlier age.
It is, rather, that I the ‘reader’ have changed. The changed ‘who’ whom I have become - or grown into - has meant that the meaning of the ‘poem’ for my older, changed self has acquired a richness and complexity shaped by my life experience.

Let me give an example. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins was the subject of my BA Honours thesis in the Department of English here at this university. I first read Hopkins’ ‘Terrible Sonnets’ in 1964 as a 20 year old University of Sydney third year student and a member of a Catholic Religious Order. As a Marist Brother the dominant meaning I took from the poems was that Hopkins was grappling with the range of spiritual, theological and intellectual stresses associated with what the mystic St John of the Cross described as “the dark night of the soul”.

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing –
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No lingering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief’.

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! Creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

In late 1996 I was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (MND), an incurable terminal disease which progressively paralyses your arms, legs, swallowing and speaking muscles. Eventually, if you live that long, you end up with a fully alert mind and consciousness inside a vegetative body capable only of eye-blinking - before the breathing muscles give way, and you die.

The neurologist told me that I could expect to die sometime between 1999 and 2001. Later that day Hopkins’ poem absolutely roared into my consciousness. All of a sudden the mountains of my mind and the cliffs over which I was frightfully hanging assumed an awful reality.

Instantly I acquired a far deeper and more terrifying understanding of how impossible it would be for another human being, other than Jackie, to have an exact idea of what it was like for me ‘hanging’ there. But, unlike Hopkins at the end of the poem, that night I found no comfort whatever in the assertion that death ends life and that each day dies with sleep. Indeed, when I woke up next morning, a large slab of my then dark hair had turned grey overnight!
Hopkins’ poem has reverberated within me ever since. But now with a different flavour. Although now almost completely paralysed, I am still alive. I am still working. I am still loving and being loved. With the fantastic support of others and equipment, I am in a curious way more calm now than I was then back in 1996 when I still retained virtually all of my physical capacities. But I’m not just still “hanging” there – I’m actually still ‘hanging in’ there.

In Australia: every day one Australian dies of MND and one more is diagnosed with this wretched, currently incurable and inevitably fatal affliction. For a disease first identified in the scientific literature by the great French neurologist Jean Charcot in 1869, it is a scientific / medical research disgrace that in 2006 nobody still understands the cause and nobody has yet discovered a cure for MND.

You may be astonished to realise that MND kills 4 to 5 times more Australians each year than AIDS does. The average period of survival of people with MND from diagnosis to death is only 3 to 4 years. At one extreme end of the survival spectrum are people like Pro Hart who lived for only 3 months after being afflicted. Others, most famously Professor Stephen Hawking, survive for much longer. I too am a pretty rare long term survivor. But, for obvious reasons, I have to speak about the future with fragility.

So, I would like to finish by broadening the perspective by repeating to you – who constitute the future of our English teaching profession – what I wrote at the end of Chapter 10 in my autobiography *A Passion for Life* which ABC Books published in 2004. As I reflected over the quality of public education that Jackie and I want for our two children – Sophie who is in Year 12 and Millie who is in Year 8, both at Cherrybrook Technology High School– I wrote what I hope will resonate with your own aspirations as future teachers of English.

Therefore, not just as a professional educator, but as a Dad, I want all future teachers of my Sophie and Millie to abide by three fundamental principles that I believe should underpin teaching and learning in every public school.

First, to nurture and challenge my daughters’ intellectual and imaginative capacities way out to horizons unsullied by self-fulfillingly minimalist expectations.

Don’t patronise them with lowest-common-denominator blancmange masquerading as knowledge and learning; nor crush their love for learning through boring pedagogy. Don’t bludgeon them with mindless ‘busy work’ and limit the exploration of the world of evolving knowledge merely to the tyranny of repetitively churned-out recycled worksheets. Ensure that there is legitimate progression of learning from one day, week, month, term and year to the next.
Second, to care for Sophie and Millie with humanity and sensitivity, as developing human beings worthy of being taught with genuine respect, enlightened discipline and imaginative flair.

And third, please strive to maximise their potential for later schooling, post-school education, training and employment, and for the quality of life itself so that they can contribute to and enjoy the fruits of living within an Australian society that is fair, just, tolerant, honourable, knowledgeable, prosperous and happy.

When all is said and done, surely this is what every parent and every student should be able to expect of school education: not only as delivered within every public school in NSW, but within every school not only in Australia but throughout the entire world.