2016 marks 50 years since the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English was held at Dartmouth College. Since referred to as ‘the Dartmouth Seminar’, or simply ‘Dartmouth’, its legacy, in various forms, was the subject of the pre-conference symposium held at this year’s AATE/ALEA conference. There in Adelaide, just as Anglo-American delegates had done so in Dartmouth fifty years prior, participants asked each other, ‘What is English?’ Over a day, local and international teachers, teacher-educators, professors and curriculum historians sought to probe the themes, concerns and direction of secondary English education with reference to the present moment, most notably the context of a (new) national curriculum in Australia.

In writing this Editorial Introduction, I am speaking both as an English teacher, now that I am back in the classroom, and as a researcher, having recently finished my doctoral studies in the history of education. That latter project led directly to my original proposal to recognise and celebrate the original Dartmouth event, 50 years ago, a proposal that was realised in the Adelaide symposium. I want to take this opportunity therefore to say something about the context and the occasion, and to introduce the articles that follow. I must acknowledge right at the outset, however, that I have been working with Brenton Doecke and Bill Green in putting this Special Issue together, as well as in setting up the Adelaide symposium, and it has been a genuine privilege to learn from two leaders in this field.

With a relevant and informed sense of the work we do today as teachers and why, Bill and Brenton have been constant and instrumental in speaking out about the value of knowing our subject’s past to shape our future. I am indebted to them for their co-editing expertise and generous guidance in formulating the day itself, as well as this Special Issue. In addition to ongoing advice from Bill and Brenton, I am grateful for the AATE/ALEA’s support for Dartmouth 2016 as a pre-conference event, and thank Alison Robertson and Monika Wagner in particular.

Having promoted the day as a ‘re-reading’ of Dartmouth, what I had hoped the symposium would do is examine today’s English subjects in the light of post-Dartmouth thinking. Doing so enacts the approach of Brenton Doecke (1999, p. 3), who reminds us that we are all faced with the challenge of critically examining our own circumstances and developing a perspective on the conditions which have shaped us as English teachers. On the day, twelve speakers presented their reflections on various questions raised by the original Dartmouth Seminar. In planning, Brenton emphasised the importance of the dialogical, and with an audience traversing multiple generations of teachers and researchers, Dartmouth 2016 also attempted to ask, ‘Where to now?’

The day itself focused on questions of what we do as English educators, and why: Do teachers today know about the significance of Dartmouth? Do they need to? If so, why? Why does English take the form that it does today, and as Ian Reid intimates, how can understanding continuities and discontinuities in ‘English curriculum discourses and practices’ (Reid, 2003, p. 100) help teachers today to be better practitioners? There were obvious controversies with posing such a theme, however: was it too academic, for instance? Would busy classroom teachers be interested? Australians were not even represented at the 1966 Seminar, and so why should we make a fuss of observing its 50th anniversary? This latter question made the line of inquiry even more important for me, and I became even more determined to pursue it. It is not good enough to think of the English I teach as merely derivative of a more ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ version of an imported discipline. What teachers do in Australian classrooms is not an inferior hybrid of Anglo-American ideas, as though English teaching in Australia was not shaped by its own history and traditions of research and scholarship. So I was interested to hear what our speakers would
instigate or provoke in terms of historiography, questions of literature and language, and the space that the ‘I’s (of language, literature and literacy) occupy in 2016.

Events like Dartmouth, and perhaps for some of us the 2016 symposium, are part of the ‘professional memory’ that Paul Tarpey (2016, p. 77) identifies. Tarpey theorises that the settings in which we have taught continue to shape our professional identities in the form of ‘resources (memories, values, identities, discourses and practices) that remain with practitioners throughout their careers’. These ‘resources’ include the wise counsel, good support and critical feedback we gather from our colleagues and leaders, and my own editing and teaching ‘resources’ have been considerably strengthened by the guidance offered to me by Brenton and Bill who encouraged and supported me throughout this Dartmouth 2016 initiative.

In various ways, Dartmouth has shaped the identities of contributors to the Seminar, all of whom were invited to participate because of their interest in history. In planning the day in Adelaide, we were also mindful of inviting contributors whose biographies and professional experiences meant that their perspectives on Dartmouth would be significantly different, enabling us to generate a cross-generational dialogue about the meaning of the original Seminar and its relevance or otherwise today. As I continued with my reading about it, what struck me about Dartmouth was the sense of collegiality, of teachers and academics together being a part of something – a project, a dialogue – and that a distinctive post-Dartmouth, ‘collaborative spirit’ evolved as James Britton and Nancy Martin were conducting their research and writing ‘in and around London’ (Durbin, 1987, p. 70). For me, the Dartmouth associations include a renewed enthusiasm for the profession, a feeling of energy generated, and a sense of possibility into which English teachers immersed themselves. Change was afoot and, as Bill described it to me, it was a ‘project of possibility’, where there was change all around teachers, and teachers were a part of that change. It produced a spirit of collegiality, an energy of intellectual teaching exchange, and a collective enlivening of the subject. It becomes a narrative of agency for the profession therefore, and the importance of teachers generating ‘agentive narratives’ (Tarpey, 2016, p. 78 – italics in the original). Such fervour and a sense of possibility remain essential attitudes for the renewal and invigoration of any subject and its teachers, particularly given the stringent conditions we encounter today.

While the fifty-year anniversary seems to celebrate or even venerate a past event, in actual fact, the ‘re-visiting’ of Dartmouth in 2016 attempted to situate, explore and articulate what it is that this flexible and variable subject called ‘English’ is doing in the here and now, without celebrating or denigrating an event in the past which we can read from a distance. The event in Adelaide was a historical inquiry that sought to understand how Dartmouth has (for good or ill) shaped our understanding of subject English. It was not an exercise in nostalgia. Nor was it an attempt to see the values and knowledge associated with Dartmouth as some kind of dreadful mistake in the history of English teaching. The presenters shared the conviction that in order to understand English as it is taught at present it is important to understand the history of the subject. With this mind, 2016 also marks twenty years since Bill Green and Catherine Beavis published their historical study of English in Australia, pioneering in that it was the first book-length publication that specifically addressed the curriculum history of English in Australia. It rightfully identifies the multiplicity of English ‘subjects’ and the influence of State-based personnel and practices in forming those subjects (Green & Beavis, 1996). As time passes, these histories shift in their place but retain their importance in an Australian curriculum which is now influenced by national and international policy, theory and story, past and present. So as we examine how curricular connections or narratives contribute in this way to the many narratives and versions of history that construct our subject, we need be aware of the mythic or heroic tales of the past which can cloud the way we interpret our subject and interpret curriculum history transacting in the here and now.

At the Adelaide symposium, one participant made the point that what we were doing that day was making tomorrow’s history, and with that in mind, this subject ‘English’ was not only a product of a history but was continuing to evolve. In some circles, the original Dartmouth Seminar has come to be known for its binary versions of English – British and American – and such a binary, while ‘dangerous’, is helpful for the way in which it foregrounds the tremendous impact of context, and the emphases of teaching and research upon the secondary subject domain. Re-visiting the Seminar now highlights the historical distinctiveness of English in Australia. English has evaded simple definition but continues to stimulate complex conversations about literature, language and the wider world, and these ideas underlie some of the themes that
arose on the day, and have been taken up again in this Special Issue: the history of English, the places of literature and experience, writing and process, and the future – where to now?

The essays assembled in this issue are based on presentations given on the day, but have all been reworked to offer readers a conversation that extends beyond that event. The first two papers, by Ian Reid and John Yandell respectively, focus on the ‘experience’ emphasis that emerged from Dartmouth. Separate papers by Bill and Brenton concentrate on ‘history’, followed by a paper by Wayne Sawyer, Larissa McLean Davies, Susanne Gannon and me collectively that examines some ‘other’ Dartmouth texts. Three papers by Jory Brass, Emily Frawley, and Graham Parr with Helen Woodford present different perspectives responding to the question, ‘Where to from here?’, and these are prelude to the issue’s final paper, John Dixon’s ‘Dartmouth + 50’ – yet another ‘reflection’ on Dartmouth and after (see Dixon, 2003), by someone who was actually there!

The versions of English discussed at Dartmouth remind me that English regularly takes on new content, new skills, new expectations, new testing, new curricula and new texts over time, and nonetheless remains recognisable, flexible and remarkably accommodating. English adapts, and so do its teachers. It is this ‘life’ of English which sustains that original spark of interest nurtured by leaders in curriculum history, and it is this ‘life’ of English which motivates this re-reading of Dartmouth, and I hope, proves energising and reinvigorating for readers of this issue.

References