The key words in this statement of belief are words at the centre of our discipline: cultures, representation, self, world and the relationships among them are at the very heart of our ongoing work with students. They are, significantly, words whose meanings within the profession of English teaching have undergone substantial transformation over time, even in what has been a relatively brief disciplinary history, so that today they have quite specific implications for how and what we teach.

The words and concepts underpinning what we do have taken on new meanings and implications in the contemporary context of a rapidly changing communication-saturated environment, and our profession has actively embraced those changed understandings. This is hardly surprising, given that it is precisely the idea of language as dynamic, complex, multivalent which has drawn us as teachers of English to our chosen work. Teaching in this field means exploring with young people the ways in which language connects us to, and engages us with, the constantly changing worlds it produces and reproduces. We share with them our awareness that language is not static but constantly transformed and transformative in relation to broader contexts.

One difficulty we face as a profession, however, is that many of our disciplinary key words are not drawn from an arcane and specialised vocabulary, but are in general circulation. Indeed, these words seem to the broader community to be words whose meanings are singular, transparent, stable and unchanging. The English language, so the story goes, is a seemingly innocent word, with a supposedly singular meaning for the broader community, and for the elements of the media that purport to speak on behalf of that broader community, and is often invoked as a synonym for ‘our’ national identity, assumed to be embodied in a specific body of valued texts. In fact, though, it is a word with a complex history of evolving meanings and usages.

Raymond Williams notes, in his entry for the word culture in his Keywords: A Vocabulary of Society and Culture, (1976: p. 15) that the word ‘is a shared body of words and meanings’, meanings both ‘available and developing’ and ‘connected to certain forms of thought’. The available and developing meanings of the key words in Statement Two are central to the working vocabulary of English teachers today, and our professional commitment to our discipline requires us to be aware of those developing meanings. We need to be aware, too, of the ways in which the key words take on their new meanings in relation to emerging bodies of thought – for example, changing definitions of the nature and function of language. In the spirit of that commitment, then, it is worth examining the available and developing meanings of the key words in Statement Two, and analysing those meanings in relation to the bodies of thought which inform them.

Clearly the word culture, in the years of the ‘culture wars’ with which sections of the Australian, and indeed the international, media have been so much preoccupied, has become highly politicised and contested. It is a seemingly innocent word, with a supposedly singular meaning for the broader community, and for the elements of the media that purport to speak on behalf of that broader community, and is often invoked as a synonym for ‘our’ national identity, assumed to be embodied in a specific body of valued texts. In fact, though, it is a word with a complex history of evolving meanings and usages.
culture in Keywords, that it is ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ because of its ‘intricate historical development and its use in distinct disciplines’ (p. 87). For the discipline of English, that complexity has been enormously productive: the word today offers a variety of definitions that are a result of layers of accretions through time. These developing and broadening meanings may certainly include that of a specific ‘national heritage’ of texts, but the word must not be confined to any single definition. Indeed, to set the plural of the word culture at the centre of Statement Two is to produce a space in which a number of meanings can unfold to provide enormous possibilities for the English classroom.

Even a very brief summary of Williams’s history and contextualisation of the word gives a sense of the increasing complexity and range of meanings it develops through the centuries and in different contexts. Its forerunner was the Latin word cultura, which meant cultivation or tending. The English word culture emerged in the fifteenth century as a noun of process: the tending of animals or crops. From the early sixteenth century to the early nineteenth, while the word continued to be used in this way, its meaning was extended to imply the tending of human development. By the nineteenth century it had also taken on the added meaning of a ‘general process’ process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. The English use of the word in the nineteenth century was also influenced by a key shift in its German form. Cultur was originally used to describe a single trajectory of human development, a unilinear progress towards European ‘high’ culture, but in the late eighteenth century J.G. Herder suggested that this meaning was too Eurocentric and limiting. He argued that as many cultures had undergone similar processes of development it was essential to refer to cultures in the plural form. His broadened meaning – the specific cultures of different nations and periods – can be seen as a response to an historical context in which a new awareness of the complexity of non-European societies was emerging. The further development of the word in the 1840s produced a quite specific meaning which would become central to the discipline of anthropology: ‘the way of life of a people’. In other contexts, though, in the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, the word’s meaning as ‘processes of intellectual spiritual and aesthetic development’ was often narrowed to focus on the elite arts such as literature and painting (Williams, 1976, p. 87–91).

This narrowed meaning derives in part from the early history of the discipline of English, where, following the lines set down by Matthew Arnold and later F.R. Leavis, culture came in some contexts to mean a specifically English aesthetic tradition which needed to be defended from the encroaching influences of a burgeoning mass media in the case of Leavis. The defensive meaning came to be associated with the ‘great tradition’ – a valued canon of works deemed to be central to the English nation, its values, its morality, its cultural identity.

More recently, however, the idea of culture as the whole way of life of a specific group, and the association of culture with intellectual and artistic endeavour have come together in our discipline through the emergence of the idea of culture as a ‘signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored’ (Williams, 1981, p. 13). Here, the meaning again broadens in response to the emergence of a new context, this time one in which the processes of communication – the sharing of meanings through language, whether visual or verbal, words or images – become central to daily life as the symbolic, the production and circulation of ideas, meanings, images, becomes the raw material of economic exchange.

It is this broadened definition of cultures (now, significantly plural), as groups producing and circulating shared meanings, which is central to Statement Two. This definition suggests that culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them and ‘making sense of the world in broadly similar ways’ (Hall, 1997, p. 2). This newer meaning sees groups as representing – giving meanings to – objects, places and people, so that to become a member of a culture is to learn its ‘maps of meaning’. To explore how a ‘range’ of cultures (plural) ‘represent human experience’ expands our domain as English teachers. It is not just the pluralised and broadened definition of cultures that has this effect. The key word representation is also central to Statement Two. The word signifies a key shift in our understanding of the relationships between text and world. To define cultures as representing human experience, as sharing symbolic practices that give meanings to objects, places, people and the relations between them suggests that meaning is cultural and constructed, and therefore open to change in relation to changing contexts, rather than timeless, universal and a-contextual.
According to Statement Two, the teacher’s role is to develop the students’ capacity for engagement with a wide range of meaning-making processes, and it is precisely concepts such as cultures and representation that facilitate such engagement. Engagement goes beyond merely appreciating, or valuing, or even understanding, although these processes will certainly be at work. Engagement also means becoming capable of questioning how a culture’s representational processes work to produce meanings, rather than merely describing and valuing the meaning produced. Engagement means asking questions about the text’s context of production or reception, and about the implications of those contexts for the ways the text attempts to position the reader. Underlying such questions are some basic assumptions: that our relationship to things in the world is mediated through language; that mediation is culturally specific and contextual, and that full citizenship in the world requires an awareness of the effects of mediation in our relationship to the world.

Certainly one important role of English teaching is to develop in students an understanding and appreciation of the themes and techniques of a body of texts valued as representing the culture of a single nation (England or Australia) or the culture of ‘Western civilisation’. But that is no longer enough: the phrase ‘a range of cultures’ and the implications of the word ‘representation’ have the effect of extending the legitimate objects of study to include not only the valued canonical texts of the students’ own nation or of ‘the’ Western tradition, but also the canonical texts of other nations, the texts produced by groups within nations, or the texts produced within popular culture or subcultures.

This broadened focus questions the concept of a single cultural heritage, and can provide students with key understandings that allow them to read across and within cultures – to analyse how and why some bodies of texts might be valued as canonical within a culture, or why popular media texts which are not valued in the same way still have powerful effects within cultures. In actively engaging with cultures thus broadly defined, students indeed come to understand themselves and their world. Students’ engagement with a wide range of meaning-making processes help them to understand their own shared maps of meaning as part of a broader context, and to be self-reflexive in relation to their own cultural values and judgments. Thus the key words of this statement have complex meanings that are both a product of, and a key to understanding, today’s world.

The problem we face as a community of English teachers, however, is that the discipline-specific meanings of these terms, as outlined above, seem at times to be at odds with the definitions invoked by the media on behalf of the broader community. The current media furore over new English curricula exemplifies this problem. For it seems that the generally accepted meaning of culture in the community, or at least in the community as defined by the media, is still the earlier and narrower one, with its underlying meaning of the defence of a nationally valued canon of elite arts. The broadening of our key words, with the concomitant opening up of the classroom to a much wider range of texts and contexts, is often read as the abandoning of ‘our’ heritage, and ‘our’ national identity. It is implied that the new curricula are making popular or sub-cultural texts and practices into a new canon, devaluing or even ignoring the great tradition and over-valuing the popular and modish. It is often suggested too, that the way in which these newer curricula approach popular culture is uncritical and celebratory, (an assumption which, ironically, is a residue of the older, more reverential approach of much traditional criticism to the canon). It seems, too, that there is currently a backlash against the ‘relativism’ of an approach that puts popular and canonical texts, ‘our’ national and ‘their’ foreign texts, into the same syllabus, and applies to them all the same range of questions and analyses.

The attack on the teaching of a range of cultures is perhaps not surprising in the current context. Since September 11, 2001 there has been an increasing anxiety in the community about the threat posed by the culturally ‘other’ and about the need to articulate and defend a unified and stable national cultural identity in the face of a threat from that ‘other’. Surely as the exposure of a discipline devoted to the exploration of language, its multiple meanings and effects, we can find ways to explain to an anxious public that the discipline is unlikely to abandon a body of work with which it has traditionally engaged, but that that ‘heritage’ is only one among many; that our expanded contemporary key word understandings provide essential tools which encourage our students to live, in the fullest sense of the word, in a complex world comprised of a ‘range of cultures’ for which the binaries ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘high’ and ‘low’ are far too simple.

References
Williams, R 1976. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana, London.