

# A SHAKESPEAREAN Tale

OBSERVERS OF THE RESTRUCTURING OF INDUSTRY TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIP IN B.C. COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR WONDERING IF THEY ARE WATCHING *THE TEMPEST*, *A COMEDY OF ERRORS*, *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* OR *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL*.

BY GORD STEWART

**d**EPENDING ON YOUR SOURCE IN THE OFTEN ARCANE world of industry training and apprenticeship, any or all of the Bard's play titles could be applied to the controversial process that began in spring 2001. A then newly elected B.C. Liberal Government commissioned a Core Services Review of the former Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) which culminated on January 2, 2004 when legislative life was finally breathed into the new B.C. Industry Training Authority.

"To provide effective and efficient industry focused training that meets the skill requirements of employers and career aspirations of learners in British Columbia."

This harmless sounding vision statement for the fledgling Authority developed by an Industry Transition Advisory Committee reveals nothing of the vitriolic struggle that occurred between stakeholders groups to align the newest incarnation of the industry training system with their long unmet expectations. And despite near unanimous agreement from business, labour, educators, learners and government that ITAC had abjectly failed to meet its mandate of making the system in B.C. more responsive to the needs of its clients, battle lines were quickly drawn when discussion began around how to move the new system forward.

Certainly one of the stumbling blocks to reaching consensus on where to go with industry training and apprenticeship in B.C. was agreeing upon the system's fundamental *raison d'être*. If nothing else, the damning results of ITAC's Core Review provided a long overdue opportunity for stakeholders to air their expectations of the system and, not surprisingly, it turned out that ITAC had been many things to many people.

Educators primarily viewed ITAC as a funding source for Entry Level Trades Training and Apprenticeship courses. In essence, they saw government, rather than industry, as their client. Learners and apprentices typically experienced ITAC as a bureaucratic maze to be navigated on the way to provincial and interprovincial certification in their chosen trades. Some labour and employer groups wanted ITAC to function as a regulatory agency with a mandate to designate and enforce compulsory trade legislation. Other employer groups simply hoped ITAC would fund training programs, offer credentials and otherwise get out of their way.

Given the disparate expectations from its key stakeholders and the fact that they were all represented on a 25-person Board that operated under a consensus-based decision making model, it is clear in hindsight that ITAC was doomed to failure from inception.

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMON NG

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## The Tempest

WITH ITAC WAS DEALT THE DEATH BLOW BY the 2001 Core Services Review, the question in B.C. quickly became: What now?

Warts and all, ITAC had been responsible for managing the progress of some 16,000 apprentices who were still in the system and all indications were that there was potential to increase that number significantly as the provincial economy began to heat up. Predictably with ITAC being a pseudo-government agency, a committee was struck in April 2002 to make recommendations on how to make industry training in B.C. more relevant.

The nine-member Industry Training Transition Advisory Committee (TAC) appointed by government had strong representation from the construction industry including Philip Hochstein from the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association, Murray McLeay from the B.C. Construction Association and Rod Goy from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Over a nine-month period, the TAC developed the skeleton of a model for the new system and produced a discussion paper that was to ignite industry training debate around the province, and throughout the national apprenticeship community, in a way that had not been seen for years.

The overriding theme in the TAC's recommendations was that the industry training system needed to become less bureaucratic and more flexible and client-centred if it was to respond to the emergent and growing needs of the economy in B.C. Some of the more contentious specific directions included eliminating compulsory trade designation from training legislation, creating a small non-stakeholder Board, significantly cutting back on governments' role (targeting the elimination of approximately 100 staff positions), eliminating the politically charged trade advisory committees in favour of ad hoc curriculum working groups and embracing competency-based modular training and assessment.

## A Comedy of Errors?

ARMED WITH THE TOPICAL DISCUSSION PAPER: A New Model for Industry Training in British



The B.C. Minister of Advanced Education, Shirley Bond, has set an ambitious target of growing apprentices numbers by 10% annually over a three-year period. The opportunity is certainly there if the economy grows as predicted.

Columbia, the TAC and government decided to take the show on the road and regional invitation-only stakeholder-balanced discussion forums were booked throughout the province in early 2003.

You think Super Bowl tickets are hard to get? The demand to get on the lists for the regional forums was overwhelming. At the first forum in Nanaimo, organized labour staged a demonstration, storming the doors to the hall, although they had also packed the inside with uninvited guests. TV cameras showed up, the traveling circus was launched and began winding its way through B.C.

The forums ended up ranging in tone from rant-filled protests, often from the same participants traveling town to town, to genuinely insightful discussions about how a creaky old system could be refitted to make it work in the economy of the 21st century. What became abundantly clear was that, despite its problems, the credentials offered by, and the majority of the training sponsored by, the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission were treasured by graduates and active apprentices.

The bulk of the substantive criticism leveled at the new model during the forums focused on the strategic direction away from a regulatory role, and the concept of modular training.

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There is little question that, ostensibly for safety reasons, organized labour, and some employers, placed great importance on compulsory trade designations and its attendant regulations to limit numbers of apprentices and trainees. Cynics have suggested that the motivating factor behind support for strict regulations may have been market protectionism.

Regardless, the TAC recommended that, in so much as public and worker safety regulations about who can work in designated trades are needed, and to eliminate overlap, such regulations should be housed in public safety acts and Workers Compensation Board regulations.

Interestingly “modular training” embraced almost everywhere else in learning communities turned out to be an incendiary discussion point.

For organized labour, the concept seemed to imply “de-skilling” of the trades whereby individual skill modules might be credentialed and workers would be less likely to progress on to broader credentials.

For employers in the industrial community, modular training offered workers the flexibility to tailor their training to meet the unique demands of their sector. The commercial construction craft-based trade silos do a very poor job of describing the skill requirements of electrical or mechanical maintenance workers in sophisticated pulp and paper or refining operations.

Regardless of one's biases, there is no doubt that the business world has experienced a prolonged trend toward reorganization within markets. Some businesses have diversified while others have become increasingly more specialized. Companies that once sold only pharmaceutical products now also flog computers, housewares and insurance, while contractors that once built projects from A to Z with their own forces now act in project management capacities and hire numerous specialty contractors. These changes are driven by the market, difficult to anticipate and always in a state of flux.

For an industry training system to stay relevant and adapt to ever-evolving business needs, flexibility must be built into the system

at its foundation and that is where the concept of bite size modules that can be individually adjusted, discarded, added or bundled in different fashions (credentials) offers promise.

To this day, the debate around the applicability of the modular approach to apprenticeship training has occurred primarily at the rhetorical and emotional level rather than the substantive. Bringing it to that level will certainly be one of the key challenges facing the Industry Training Authority.

### Much Ado About Nothing?

NOW THAT THE INDUSTRY TRAINING AUTHORITY in B.C. is up and running, what has really changed? As it turns out, quite a bit in terms of how services are delivered, but very little in terms of what services are actually delivered.

Apprenticeship offices throughout the province have been closed and the field apprenticeship counselor role has largely been eliminated. A central apprenticeship office in the Lower Mainland is processing all applications for registration and exams are being proctored by government agents throughout the province who actually have a much greater provincial presence (nearly 60 offices) than did ITAC. The board of directors of the Industry Training Authority and Brian Clewes, the newly hired CEO with an HR background in telecommunications and the industrial sector, are examining options for further improving registration and assessment processes.

Apprentices are now booking their own training sessions directly with colleges (until 2002, apprentice counselors booked classes on behalf of apprentices) and developing closer relationships with the educators. And educators are starting to show their entrepreneurial side by marketing directly to apprentices and offering fast tracking for students who can handle it.

On the regulatory front, the debate about compulsory trade designation and enforcement has rightly been shifted to the Safety Systems Authority that has a public safety mandate in a number of trade areas.

### All's Well that Ends Well

FROM A CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE, the timing for the retooling of the appren-

ticeship training system in B.C. could not have been better.

B.C.'s residential construction is booming and the ICI sector has finally started to pick up after years spent watching skilled workers cross the Rockies for the opportunities generated by the oil and gas boom in Alberta. With the Winter Olympics coming to Vancouver/Whistler in 2010, tens of thousands of person years of construction employment will be generated by facilities and related infrastructure construction.

As we approach the peak years of 2006 and 2007 for Olympic-related manpower demands, apprentice numbers continue to climb in B.C., aided in great part by consistently positive media stories about the desirability of careers in trades and technical occupations.

The "open for business" messaging of the New Industry Training Authority has certainly engaged industry groups and educators. Numerous innovative pilot projects have been launched in B.C. to test everything from progressive credentialing to video-based instruction to apprentice training in high schools. And even more industry groups are starting to meet to discuss how to engage the new Authority, which is no longer limited to supporting the one-size-fits-all craft training model. Reinforcing bar installers, concrete formworkers, residential house framers, residential electricians and multi-skilled industrial mechanical and electrical workers are just some of the new training programs and credentials that could be coming on board in the B.C. construction sector over the next year or two.

The B.C. Minister of Advanced Education, Shirley Bond, has set an ambitious target of growing apprentices numbers by 10% annually over a three-year period and the opportunity is certainly there if the economy grows as predicted. Old ways die hard in tradition-bound industries like construction. The challenge for the new Industry Training Authority will be to communicate the benefits of the new flexible system and to get enough successes early enough that industry starts to rediscover just how effective a well-run industry training system can be as a partner in human resource development. ☐

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