TEMPEST-TOSSED: A LEARNING JOURNEY IN HIGH TECH

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This is the story of a work-related storm. It's about me, a former high school English teacher and graduate student, who, tired of teaching and studying at university, seeks a new career as an education consultant and technical trainer for a high tech company. Having worked in neither the private sector nor high tech before, I embark on an expedition that redefines my way of thinking.

Act I: Tempest-Tossed

Life is full of storms. One endures many squalls throughout life that are not real storms at all, just figurative ones—situations where you feel cast adrift and forced to batten down hatches, throw sea anchors overboard and beat against waves. Embarking on a new career can be one such storm. For me, learning and working in the high tech industry felt like being caught in a raging tempest. Gales swept me in opposing directions and chance of survival seemed slim.

When one embarks on a new career path, a squall advances quickly. Personal and professional lives are flung to the waves, rain stings cheeks and wind numbs hands. My career change came after eight years of teaching at a boarding school and a year of graduate school. It was around the time I began writing my thesis that storm clouds started to brew and perhaps I should have looked up. But when my friend, Tom, asked me to work for his high tech company, I leapt at the opportunity.

Tom was a senior partner in a high tech company and working on an implementation project in the Pacific Northwest. His company specialized in operations management, providing computer systems and business solutions to help large organizations manage resources, inventory, workflow and equipment. Tom's offer came while his company was developing software and business practices for a city water department. Although city officials had been consulted, few knew how to use the software. My working assignment was to teach and design educational material. I was responsible

for assembling information, organizing and writing an instructional manual. I was also expected to teach the material to 200 company employees while mentoring others who would eventually do the same.

The experiment was to test my professional skills and assess whether they were adaptable to the high tech industry. This meant determining which relevant professional skills I possessed and identifying those which I needed. From a personal and professional perspective, was I fit to work in the high tech industry? What professional skills would I require to be a successful education consultant in there?

O Brave New World

I liken my journey to *The Tempest* because of my close identification with the main character, Prospero, and his daughter, Miranda. Although I do not profess to have the same sweeping powers as the exiled Duke, I share issues and obstacles common to both characters. I identify with Miranda's wide-eyed innocence and Prospero's roles as teacher and exiled castaway. I also relate to their ability to endure storms.

The Tempest takes place on a deserted island where Prospero and Miranda have been shipwrecked for many years. The story begins with another shipwreck, but this time the storm is deliberate and conjured by Ariel, Prospero's magic fairy. This ship carries an assortment of people, notably Alonso, the King of Naples, his son Ferdinand, and Prospero's brother Antonio. Prospero is eager to have these individuals on his island to teach them a lesson.

Years ago, Prospero was the Duke of Milan, but was banished to this island with Miranda by Antonio, who took over his brother's dukedom. Prospero was sent out to sea with only his books as comfort. He has spent years on the island reading philosophy and practising magic, his only company, Miranda, Ariel and a malformed slave, Caliban. During the years, Prospero had his books, whereas Miranda was raised in isolation. She was too young to understand the political underhandedness that precipitated her father's departure, and too naïve to realize that her father's preoccupation with reading philosophy and magic rather than attending to affairs of state had caused his downfall. Prospero plans the shipwreck of his enemies in order to seek vengeance on those who wronged him. When all are shipwrecked on the island, the plan unfolds and he and Ariel play magical tricks on the survivors. What he does not expect, however, is for Miranda to fall in love with Ferdinand, the King's son.

The play culminates with all characters before Prospero to receive judgement. He prepares to leave his island and make amends for the past. He

verbally reprimands the men who exiled him, forgives them and then announces his intention to destroy his ability to use magic. Marriage arrangements are made between Ferdinand and Miranda and all are ready to set sail for Naples. During these events in Act V, Miranda announces her famous "brave new" lines, in which she expresses wonder and delight at seeing so many finely dressed, civilized Europeans for the first time. Prospero, more sober minded and mature, comments after her, "Tis new to thee." These four words are wonderfully pregnant. In them, he acknowledges his awareness of the nature and complexity of human beings, and negates Miranda's exuberance (Johnston, 1999). The Brave New World Prospero knows is one where magic does not work. It is a Machiavellian world of court, where plotting against others, even against family for the sake of political power, is commonplace. In this world, if leaders take their minds off political realities for long they find themselves in boats with books heading to unknown exiles.

The Brave New World at the dawn of the twenty-first century is not quite what Huxley envisioned or Prospero knew. It is dedicated to technological advancement, which in turn has changed the way citizens live, work and do business. It has also changed the way they learn. If Miranda were to arrive in today's world to marry Ferdinand and carry on her father's legacy, she would have to absorb a great deal of information quickly. Living and working at the dawn of the new century means dealing with continuous change. Miranda, like me, would have her hands full.

The New World is swamped with technology. Dot-com and e-business splash across headlines of newspapers, magazines, and television advertisements. Technological innovations have brought faster product cycles, changing work processes, and a smaller, more skilled and internationally competitive workforce. Many jobs and job skills have become obsolete, while entirely new occupational categories requiring different qualifications are being created (Fisher, Rubenson & Schuetze, 1994).

Work-related values have changed. Work is viewed as more uncertain, just-in-time, and knowledge-based: "Graduates are entering a workplace characterized by change. Public, private, and not-for-profit organizations are downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, removing layers of bureaucracy, revolutionizing work process, developing team approaches, and empowering workers" (Evers, Rush & Bedrow, 1998, p. 3). In Canada's rapidly changing work world professionals are obliged to update continuously their skills and qualifications. The contemporary high-speed work environment demands

competencies of identity development and heightened adaptability, which Hall and Mirvis (1995) call "meta-skills," or skills for learning how to learn.

There has also been a shift in traditional values and expectations relating to the work world. Hall and Mirvis (1995) dub it "the new career contract." The contract is characterized by a move from the organizational to the protean career, based on self-direction in the pursuit of psychological success in one's work (Hall, 1976, 1986). Instead of more traditional concepts of career as a linear progression of upward moves or as a fairly predictable series of discrete stages (Driver, 1994), the protean concept encompasses a more flexible, mobile career course, with peaks and valleys, left turns, moves from one line of work to another (Hall & Mirvis, 1995).

My situation was an example of the shift towards a new career contract. I was defining my identity in the workforce. One of the keys to understanding the new contract is that employee needs and concerns change over the course of the career, as do skill demands of the fields in which the employee works (Quinn, 1992). Continuous learning is required for success; learning how to learn is a core career competency: "In other words, we should forget about clinging desperately to one company, or one career path. What matters now is having the competitive skills required to find work when we need it, wherever we can find it" (Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994, p. 207).

The amount of learning that would be necessary during my career shift was not beyond contemporary expectations for business and high tech. My career shift was not extraordinary. I was raised and educated to think "working life" meant an education, career choice, training and learning on the job. This was dated. I was re-entering a new world with old-world values. Perhaps my situation was not dissimilar to Miranda's.

Miranda and I would have a lot to learn about what it was like to live in a new city—a bustling, business-centred, and work-filled community. Prospero was right. He knew life must be lived in the real world, in Milan or Naples, and Miranda could not find fulfilment on the island. I could not hide on my island either—as sheltered, safe and isolated as my school community was. Realities of life must be encountered and dealt with as effectively as possible.

Changing jobs and gears meant the needle on my learning curve would be pushing red. When I started work, Tom, in typical high tech fashion, told me he needed me to get busy as soon as possible. Training was scheduled to start in six weeks and I was hired just-in-time. As a graduate student, my experiences as learner were situated within a defined, stylized and predictable realm. But now the necessity of learning was less defined, less

formalized, and more immediate. It was part of a continuous process that working professionals face in the contemporary work world.

Act II: At Sea

My new job meant venturing to a new city and country. As an official member of the Canadian brain drain, I headed towards Project Island with a work visa, empty briefcase and strict deadlines. I had little time for patriotic guilt and nostalgia for CBC radio. My flag and sail were both lowered, ready to confront the storm.

My first task upon arrival was getting familiar with the project and key players. The team had been working on the project since January and it was early May. The software implementation was set to "Go Live" at midnight, July 1st. Go Live is a term given to the specific date and time a software program is scheduled to commence officially. Real data are entered; users use. This is the first round of implementation, which potentially leads to fallout for project teams. Transitions associated with Go Live dates must run smoothly—they are the culmination of months and years of work. Tactically, the team had chosen a date smack in the centre of a holiday weekend, meaning most users would be away on vacation. Fallout would be secondary to Independence Day picnics and, I hoped, fraught with less fireworks.

I am not sure of the precise day Prospero was cast out to sea, but assuredly his Go Live date began shortly before the other castaways were shipwrecked. The experiment was set in motion and Prospero and Ariel were ready to perform. Caliban and Miranda, although already living on the island, were unaware of the events about to take place. Prospero was counting on these stakeholders to be key players with respect to their relations with fellow castaways. Just as Tom's company could not anticipate how end-users would deal with mandatory software implementations, Prospero has no idea how his end-users are going to react to the implementation of his experiment.

It felt odd to be in an environment knowing little about expectations and how the industry "worked." It seemed silly to ask so I kept my mouth shut, absorbing as much as possible. I knew little about technology, this particular software or applications in general. I needed to be an authority in the field if I was going to teach it. I also needed be an expert in the product we would be implementing. This was a large piece of software that would organize and manage the operations of an entire city department.

My lack of knowledge in project management, business practice and procedure was abysmal. I knew nothing of how project management functioned: timelines, deadlines, status reports, time sheets, strategies. O

Brave New World. This would be a large obstacle and ironically the most basic. It made my experience in schools seem safe and protected; I felt naïve and sheltered. And teaching adults…. I had taught high school students for years, but never adults. This didn't seem to bother the others, since they viewed teaching as teaching. I was told to devise a Training Strategy document and present it to the rest of the staff in two weeks. Project Manager Rick was at the helm and I was on the critical path.

The Training Strategy was a document that would be my master plan. I was told it should outline goals, specific approaches, target dates and methodologies. I wasn't sure where or how to begin. Rick had a maxim I would soon embrace: Don't get it right, just get it written. The storm had officially struck; I was out of my element, disoriented, off course. It was time to learn the ropes and cling to something—an academic background. Oblivious to the nuances and people of the business world, there was one element I now shared with many: I was part of the workforce that needed training and knowledge. My situation was not out of the ordinary.

Learning in the workplace is a key consideration for employers and employees, especially when it comes to beginning a new job. Almost everyone knows, starting a new job calls for rapid learning. New members of staff have to find out, in double quick time, about the geography of the workplace, the routines and demands of the job, and the relationships with managers and colleagues. (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin, 1998, p. 110)

Lifelong learning has become the motto of the new knowledge-based society (Schuetze, 1999). Organizational goals aim to facilitate environments within which learning is shared and knowledge communities built. These goals convert into productive work critically important for companies to create and maintain competitive advantage. Drucker (1991) suggests increased knowledge bolsters productivity and innovation. Botkin (1999) contends executives should facilitate knowledge growth within their organizations by building knowledge communities where learners regularly connect and share information.

I was not alone in my quest for knowledge. The pressure for employers and employees to participate in work-related education is immense.

Act III : Learning the Ropes

My experiences in high school and graduate school caused me to believe academic institutions were the only settings where "real" learning occurred. My new "academic institution" was the makeshift office. This was a non-formal setting, typical of where most workplace learning occurs. In settings

of this nature, the learner is in control, there is no formal curriculum or prescribed outcomes, and learner is commonly unaware of the extent of her learning (Hagert & Beckett, 1998). My lack of understanding in the areas of content and application, business process and teaching adults resulted in a great deal of scrambling and thinking on my feet. My new academic institution did not offer a predetermined course syllabus or reading list; I had to devise my own. This was where the real experiment began.

Prospero's name is derived from Latin "pro," meaning forward, and "spero," I hope—hopefully looking forward. A most suitable epithet. I was trying to think on my feet but, despite efforts, I secretly hoped during my twelve-hour workdays, through the cold, milky sludge at the bottom of a latte cup, an epiphany would occur: a light would go on and finally I would "get it." I had difficulty eating or sleeping during this time. I was seasick. I was trying to learn, but felt more like drowning. My thirst to learn was "normal" for someone in my circumstance, as were my insecurity, stress level and feelings of low self-worth. The literature affirms this:

> People who are in the middle of a transition process in a new career have three major problems.... First, to understand their lack of success, they begin to devalue their personal skills and strengths. Second, they have a great deal of difficulty in giving themselves permission to experience the range of emotions associated with their situations, or to seek support from others…. Third…they lose sight of specific barriers that may be holding them back and live in a cloud of relatively undefined uncertainty and hopelessness. (Borgen, 1997, p. 134)

The academics were in my camp. This motion sickness was largely due to lack of structure in my learning. I was accustomed to frameworks and mountainous resources, but now much of my learning practice consisted of scavenging through the office for morsels: this was informal learning.

Informal learning fits a key metaphor applied to education and the workforce, flexibility. It is flexible because employees learn on their own time and pace. It is effective because it is relevant to situations. What is difficult, however, is drawing information when there is no well. One can ask for assistance at the photocopier, but not from a co-worker with a Do Not Disturb sign on his office door. Part of being flexible in informal learning is knowing how to creep up on information sideways, keep to shadows and pounce unsuspectingly. Effective learning necessitates questions and direction. I was doing neither. Luckily there was enough of a rapport with my

co-workers to ask for direction and let them know I was lost—or perhaps tempest-tossed.

Act IV: Life Rafts

A life raft came in the form of a three-day workshop held by the software company in a neighbouring state. It was opportunity to experience formalized training, learn the software and secure a training manual full of exercises and templates. I would learn about the software and art of teaching adults. How would the instructor teach? How would he begin, monitor and facilitate the learning of the participants? Having never before been to a formal software workshop, this was going to be a quick study on how to orchestrate my own.

My learning within the formal setting helped, but I am not sure it would have had such an impact had it not been prefaced by a great deal of informal learning. I knew what I wanted and needed to take away from the workshop: just-in-time learning. Had I gone to the workshop entirely fresh, most of the content and nuance would have been lost. I was what Knowles (1975) calls a problem-centred learner in need of relevant information. I returned with insight. I was more comfortable with the idea of teaching adults, although I still hadn't given it much thought at this point. Now that I had some confidence in my ability with the software and also had direction, I could honestly feel myself slipping into the training consultant role.

There was much processing to be done during those precious months of preparation. Like any storm at sea, there were moments of frustration, hard work, and promise. Prior to landing on Project Island, I realized that learning was not instantaneous—the Club of Rome was not built in a day. Admitting I was lost was acceptable. This allowed me to set boundaries and appreciate limitations. In doing so, I could capitalize on strengths and focus energy to proper channels. I learned to direct my sail.

Act V: Into Thin Air...

Training was due to start and Ariel could be heard summoning thunder in distant clouds. We planned to train over two hundred people. Within that large group there were a variety of learning styles, literacy and computer literacy levels. Some participants had to be more competent with the software than others. Like Prospero, I was stranding groups of people on foreign island coves with little sense of direction, purpose or reason. Bearings would be lost and confusion certain; learning and adjustment would necessitate survival. Perhaps some of Prospero's island guests appreciated their newfound knowledge and insight and changed their ways, but others

remained relatively unaffected. As a technical trainer, I needed to consider these issues along with potential computer anxiety and stress levels in the audience. Members in our audience were about to be introduced to computers for the first time.

It was time to teach. Ariel had created the storm and cast four parties astray on alternate parts of the island. Prospero had spent years in preparation; I had spent months. Magician's robes were donned and the experiment officially began. Classes took place in a downtown building, upscale from our dingy office space. I didn't sleep the night before. Exhausted, blurry eyed, I had rehearsed over and over my opening lines, visualizing my calm manner as I casually introduced myself to the audience, cup of coffee in hand, pretending I had done this a million times before.

The twelve-member audience ambled in, larger than expected. These were not teenagers; they were full-grown city workers in denim and plaid shirts, many looking and undoubtedly feeling misplaced in an office setting behind a computer. It was seven o'clock on Monday morning and they were as tired as I was, rumpled and not thrilled about being stuck in a glossy office when work was piling up for them on other desks across the city. I had to be "on" and not waste their time.

I began the session sputtering, face scarlet. I explained who I was, where the washrooms were and what the course of events would be. I handed out binders and introduced the various sections and exercises, pointed out familiar icons on the computer screen and confirmed computer passwords. And then I did what many first-time teachers do in states of nervousness; I began reading from the workbook, asking the audience to follow along. I was scared to look up, voice crackling. My lack of sleep had deprived me of confidence; my hands began to tremble and my forehead bead. After months of preparation, I was crumbling. Some educational consultant.

And then my lengthy introduction was complete. It was time to dim lights, flip on computers and have the audience play with the software. Each participant had his own terminal and my computer screen projected to the front. We began and I calmed. They were to follow along with the workbook. The first chapter was an introduction to navigating the software. Although all knew a fraction of what the software could do and why it was being implemented, not one had had the chance to play and learn how it worked. I had, and I was teaching.

As we started into the curriculum, I relaxed. I had direction and felt grounded. Chapter objectives were clear and my job was to impart them as effectively as possible. I could do this. As their enthusiasm and questions

sparked, so did mine. Despite how little I knew, they considered me an authority. They weren't going to ask complex questions about megabytes, databases and interface resolution; they wanted to know what the software was going to provide them. Trepidation the night before was unfounded. My angst concerning computer anxiety minimized. These were ordinary people, with ordinary lives, spending another day learning at work. I could relax, breathe, and my face could return to its normal hue.

It would be foolish to pronounce the first training sessions entirely successful. I whipped through material too quickly, concentrated on using my examples rather than soliciting audience material and experience. I neglected to provide adequate time for review and was too conscious of myself. I fumbled my words, and grew scarlet on many occasions, but as the sessions progressed and I grew comfortable with my position, confidence escalated.

Humour is central to a relaxed atmosphere. I tried to establish a comfortable and non-threatening environment, complete with shtick for each session, which usually featured my Canadianisms. Inadvertent "eh's," references to the "washroom" (which apparently is where one does laundry), plus the way in which I told time were delightfully foreign. Laughter was a way to alleviate tension. This was teaching and it was fun. I was now an adult educator. The biggest challenge was juggling diverse learning levels, slowing the pace enough so that everyone could follow and be involved, yet not going too slowly and boring others. Regardless of the age of participants, a teacher can tell when she's lost her audience or when it's time to pack it in for the day.

Days spent teaching were my best on Project Island and nearing my last. After three weeks of solid training, my contract was up, my revels ended. Like the island clan, Ariel had summoned a ship to return home. Lessons had been exacted, lives altered. I was leaving a changed person: I had learned a new trade and made friends and contacts with over two hundred people in four months. Not bad for a schoolteacher from a neighbouring island. My time on Project Island provided me with a wealth of experience and knowledge. I was now privy to the world of high tech industry, its meaning, purpose and players. But with training sessions over, I was happy to say goodbye, and head home.

This storm threw me off course and through uncharted waters. It challenged me personally and professionally to think, react and reflect on a multitude of ideas and possibilities. Weathered wrinkles attest to stresses along the way. Dreams may be the stuff of life; they may energize, delight,

and educate, but life is not lived as a dream. It is possible to learn in worlds of illusion and take away knowledge and understanding.

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