

Modern Alternatives to Standards: The Future of Interpretation Canada



By Sue Ellen Fast

How can we work together to enhance interpretation and its practice in Canada?

This was the question we asked interpreters in each of the six workshops across Canada this winter. We asked for their perspective, passion and ideas about the desired condition of interpretation in Canada, and how to get there. They responded with an exciting range of opportunities under headings, like: Facebook, Technology, Develop Interp Planning Tools, Interpreters as the Voice of Environmental and Economic Change, and Training Over Long Distance on a Shoestring.

Another set of responses has been debated since IC began, as you will read in John MacFarlane's article. These include Connection French/English, Lobby Government, NAI and IC, and Standards, Training and Certification. These last three came up in every workshop. They were offered as solutions to ongoing issues such as jobs in our field being the first to be cut, managers hiring "anyone who can read a script", and other familiar problems.

I have been looking into the pros and cons of standards, testing and certification for some time, and I'd like to share my thinking.

I have reservations about them, at least for IC and our association's role in the complex and developing field of interpretation. Would standards and testing have a dampening or narrowing effect on membership, motivation, diversity of approaches, quality of work and innovation? Probably, according to my research so far.

For a couple of interesting video presentations that relate to this issue, see the links below by Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, and by Sir Ken Robinson, an internationally recognized leader in education and the development of creativity, innova-

"Would standards and testing have a dampening or narrowing effect on membership, motivation, diversity of approaches, quality of work and innovation?"

tion and human resources.

How about looking beyond the industrial metaphor, as these authors suggest? Within IC, I suspect that members are more interested in the concept of good/best practice, which aims higher than standards but stays within the technical realm. Teachers and other complex professions also use the concept of competency, which includes subjective aspects such as positive expectations, leadership qualities, judgment, people skills, etc. that enable good interpreters to inspire and excite. Putting on my EcoLeaders consulting hat for a moment, my partner Will is finding this competency concept to be useful in interpretive planning.

Susan Ashley reported in the previous issue of *InterpScan* that interpreters generally focus on praxis; roughly meaning broad-brush goals like building capacity for ethical action. Does effective

interpretation include both praxis and the fine-tipped poesis? How might they both be included in competencies? See Coulter et al's article in *Educational Insights* for an interesting discussion.

Action research and action competency concepts also look very promising for IC. These include elements of reflection and critical thinking over longer cycles of time that relate to continuing professional development and careers. This is where IC's strength lies currently, in my view.

From my reading, every profession that adopts standards, testing and certification also develops some sort of scheme for continuing professional development. We already have this with IC—it's voluntary, inexpensive and informal; e.g., this publication, workshops and conferences, and most of our other IC programs. Very appropriate, I would say, for a profession of informal educators. If we value informal education and its role in society, let's assume that informal learning has a role in professional development too. A large role, I would argue, in our field where few formal courses exist that could be used to rack up the points or hours required in traditional continuing professional development schemes.

And besides, if we want to keep innovators and pacesetters involved in IC, any such scheme will need to be relevant to them and will therefore need to include informal and developmental learning. There are some exciting new options out there, I am pleased to report, such as an informal learning cycle approach so that associations like IC can walk the talk about constructivism. For an interesting exploration of these ideas, see Lester's article in the *Journal of Continuing*

Professional Development.

It's no accident that our association has evolved into the wonderful thing we are today. IC membership has consistently voted down testing and certification by our association in the past; first in 1973 and most recently in 1999 at the Cypress Hills conference. And national occupational standards for heritage interpreter, the testing and the certification already exist in Canada; did you know? Our membership has shown little interest in these since they were developed. I have included the reference below for the standards from the IC website, where the hot link has been sitting for years. I suspect that part of the reason they have been ignored is because testing and certification are inconsistent with the inclusive, contributing, sharing, volunteering, informal- and peer-learning principles at the heart of today's IC association.

Am I against standards, testing and certification? No—as long as we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. And as long as we also consider fresher options like competencies. IC's vibrant role in the professional development of individuals and the evolution of our field in Canada needs to be recognized, I think, when we consider the future of IC.

Besides the aspects I have tried to describe in this article, there is the practical impact to think of. Who might share the huge resource- and time-consuming load of administering a credible program of standards, testing and certification? How might our module training program fit in? I expect that IC wouldn't want to exclude members through much higher fees, and that those yet to attain certification could still be members.

IC's executive members and I

have been exploring these ideas, and we have also been talking with some former executive and colleagues in related organizations. And now we have heard from many of you through the workshops and survey. I'm looking forward to analyzing your input in more detail, and to explore all your other ideas. Watch for the next issue of *InterpScan* for the results. I'm sure I can speak for the board in saying that we are delighted so many interpreters have joined the conversation!

“Am I against standards, testing and certification? No—as long as we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Sue Ellen Fast is executive director of Interpretation Canada and editor of *InterpScan*. She participated in writing the first edition of the *Heritage Interpreter Workbook* based the standards with lead authors Will Husby and former IC national chair Ann Finlayson. Sue Ellen has also written a guide to implementing standards and certification.

She enjoyed her years in the field and her television series *Nature Walk*, and she still keeps her hand in.

The views she expresses are not necessarily those of Interpretation Canada's executive board. Contact any board member or Sue Ellen if you'd like to discuss these ideas or to suggest more resources. Contact information on page 2.



Sources Mentioned

(Also available as hot links at Online Resources page at www.interpcan.ca)

Gladwell, Malcolm. “Reinventing Invention”: Stories from the Near Future, the 2008 New Yorker Conference. www.newyorker.com/online/video/conference/2008/gladwell

Robinson, Sir Ken. “Changing Paradigms”: on receiving the 2008 Royal Society for the Arts Benjamin Franklin Medal. <http://vodpod.com/watch/851997-rsa-sir-ken-robinson>

Coulter, D. et al, 2007. “A Question of Judgment: A Response to Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia.” *Educational Insights*, 11(3).

<http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/coulter/coulter.html>

Lester, Stan, 1999. “Professional bodies, CPD and informal learning: the case of conservation.” *Continuing Professional Development* 3 (4), 110-121. <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/cpd.pdf>

Heritage Interpreter National Occupational Standards, second edition, 2005. Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council. <http://www.emerit.ca>

(Register, find your way to on-line learning, order, and check back later under My Orders to download a pdf version. While you are there, take a look at the other Heritage Interpreter training and certification products.)

When Does My Membership Expire?

Check the top line of the mailing label on this issue of *InterpScan*.