

1996 Presidential Address

# Spinning a Web of Inclusion

by Sharon A. Ratliffe

SCA President

The purpose of my remarks this evening became clear for me a year ago today during the Legislative Council discussion of requests from other associations to affiliate with SCA. During the discussion of affiliate status for a communication association from another country, I overheard an informal comment: "Are we going to acknowledge affiliate associations from every country on the face of this earth?" I was troubled by this comment. I could only hope the person's frustration was related to what appears to be a downside of SCA's continual growth: the impact on limited resources (i.e., space, time, dollars), particularly during our annual convention. In any case, this comment led me in two directions: first, toward the theme of "access" for my monthly *Spectra* articles during this past year and, second, on a search for the impossible—a model organizational structure with unlimited boundaries, if not limitless resources.

It wasn't until much later in March, on a blustering day in Minneapolis, that I ducked into a Barnes and Noble Bookstore and found the model structure I was looking for: a web. No, I didn't walk into a spider web; I stepped up to a book display of a proclaimed best seller: "The Web of Inclusion." However, I really didn't know what I'd found, even though the book jacket carried the words, "A new architecture for building great organizations." What drew me to the book was the author's name.

"Sally Helgesen..." I thought to myself, "...sounds very familiar." I started reading the description of the author on the fly leaf and then I saw her picture. "She certainly looks familiar." And then under her picture I read that Ms. Helgesen grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Moments later, I noticed the book was dedicated to her father, Charles Helgesen. Chuck Helgesen was Professor of Speech at Western Michigan University when both Juddi Trent and I were undergraduate students. Sally was a young child. I later joined what became the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Western, where Chuck Helgesen and I were colleagues.

I bought Sally's book on that blustery day in Minneapolis, mostly because she was a tangential part of my past and not realizing she had a possible message for SCA's future and the title of my remarks this evening, "Spinning a Web of Inclusion."

## What is a "Web of Inclusion?"

Like many authors in these times of change, Margaret Wheatley notes in *Leadership and the New Science* that we are involved in "nothing less than the search for new sources of order in our world." Sally Helgesen offers the architecture of the web of inclusion as a source. She believes that the notion of "architecture" is essential, a matter of "...skillfully relating individual parts to a greater whole, creating a form uniquely appropriate for the exercise of a specific set of functions."

In architectural terms, just what are the characteristics of a web? The most obvious are that it builds from the center out and that the building process is never-ending. Sally Helgesen observes,

"The architect of the web works as the spider does, by ceaselessly spinning new tendrils of connection, while also continually strengthening those that already exists. The architect's tools are not force, not the ability to issue commands, but rather providing access and engaging in constant dialogue. Such an architect

recognizes that the periphery and the center are interdependent, part of a fabric, no seam of which can be rent without tearing the whole. Balance and harmony are essential if the periphery is to hold; if only the center is strong, the edges will quickly fray. [Therefore, leaders] in a web-like structure must manifest strength by yielding, and secure [their] position[s] by continually augmenting the influence of others."

In contrast to the hierarchical order that was given birth during the Industrial Age, the architectural design of the web is in the image of our current primary technology, the integrated network.

Sally Helgesen refers to Socrates for a concrete example of web-like behavior:

"...Socrates made himself accessible by frequenting the *agora* or marketplace, which lay at the center and served as the heart of ancient Athens. Yet from this central position, he assumed a role more characteristic of the periphery—that of gadfly, persistent doubter of conventional wisdom. Thus by his actions he linked the center with the periphery, building tendrils of connections that established a true web of inclusion. This process was unscripted, unpredictable; it evolved as it went along."

The collegial atmosphere in web-like organizations enables people to focus on what needs to be done, rather than on who has the authority to do it. If we are going to move toward a web-like organization, we can only hope that Socrates' fate would have been different had he lived today and been a gadfly of the Internet.

## Evidences of Web-like Behavior Emanating from and toward SCA

So what does the model of a web have to do with SCA? I believe, like most healthy organizations in these times, SCA is in the midst of a transformation that, if we are fortunate, may have no end. I see evidence of lively Socratean behavior, in the best sense, amongst us. I'm going to share some examples in true web-like form: in no particular order of importance, respecting neither primacy nor recency.

**Jef Dolan**...an SCA member on the periphery by most hierarchical standards, vividly remembers feelings of intimidation during her first SCA convention experience and conjures up the notion of a Host Committee comprised of volunteers whose role it is to build tendrils of connection with newcomers to SCA, incidentally promoting Juddi Trent's retention efforts. For the moment, Jef Dolan, and the committee of volunteers, take center stage.

**Bruce Gronbeck**...from center stage, initiates unorthodox practices that begin to even the convention playing field and predictably connect members with different allegiances in unpredictable ways. How? By removing the highly coveted unit designations from programs and by introducing the still controversial ("We can't do it that way") poster session format. It may be that removing unit designations and imposing poster sessions are not the final answers. But don't miss the point: Bruce has initiated a trial and error process that helps us interconnect in infinite ways, thereby strengthening the limitless web that holds all of us together while de-emphasizing the limited hierarchy that tends to distance us from one another.

From what some might call a "satellite web," the President of the Communication and Theatre Association of Minnesota, **Jim Graupner**, coordinates the development of a comprehensive

strategy for a proactive role in educational restructuring in his state. Twelve executive officers from eight state associations representing speech and theatre, English, mathematics, science, social studies, music, and the arts gather for a CTAM-sponsored summit last July. Among many positive results is the replacement of the original "language arts" teacher licensure title with "*Communicative Arts and Literature*." So Jim Graupner and the Communication and Theatre Association of Minnesota spin their way to the center of the SCA web as a success model for all of us to applaud and emulate.

One final example. Like Jim Graupner, **Judy Van Slyke Turk** is a member of SCA and an immediate past president of a parallel organization, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). In August, she brought the presidents and executive directors of seven communication professional organizations together in a roundtable format for the purpose of discussing how best to serve the majority of us who have memberships that overlap these organizations, how best to unite for external communication, how to streamline our administrative functions for greater efficiency and service, and simply how best to collaborate on what are now a variety of parallel, duplicative initiatives. **Bob Cox**, Executive Director of the International Communication Association (ICA), was quick to remind us that spinning an interassociational web in the form of a "Consortium of Communication Associations" has been tried, perhaps, before it's time; before this Age of Networking and Information Processing symbolized by a World Wide Web.

I could provide more illustrations as, I'm sure, could you. However, I want to get to the practicum that goes with this lecture: I'd like each of you to engage in web-like behavior immediately by beginning or reinforcing your spinning in at least one and hopefully all four of the following directions:

First, review your service commitments at your institution. What are you proactively doing to model effective communication skills and show connectedness and support between our field and other disciplines and work units? By work units, I mean academic units; but I also mean graphics, grounds, maintenance, food service, and any other area where mainly support staff are at work helping you, your colleagues, and your students engage in effective teaching and learning. If you and your colleagues are not in demand as members and leaders of the committee structure within your organizations; if your department is not viewed by support staff as one that is perceptively aware and appreciative of their services, then you have some important spinning to do! Don't let the periphery of our web fray because these edges are intricately and unmistakably interwoven with the core of our effectiveness and, maybe, our survival.

Second, go home and pull out your class rosters from the past five years and encourage your colleagues to do the same. Mount a campaign to reach out and spin a web around your former students who are prospects for our future partners in every aspect of business, government, and community. They will be the parents of our future students across this nation. Yes, spin webs around the Sally Helgesens, who have international reputations and whose work celebrates the meaning and role of communication. However, in your excitement about the famous and about the former student who saw you as a mentor and who exceeded your expectations, don't exclude *anyone* who crossed your classroom door. If they were supported in their learning, they have a positive impact to make in sharing the concepts, skills, scholarship, and magic of our field.

Third, take leadership in initiating or renewing relationships intersegmentally among the educational institutions in your local

area. Sit down with your peers who teach communication, kindergarten through graduate levels. Also seek out those who may not necessarily have credentials in our field, but who effectively facilitate their classes as interactive, lively communication environments for learning. Work together as colleagues to build a support system for the centrality of communication in your local and regional educational system.

Finally, an obvious component is missing in our SCA family for which each of us bears responsibility. As you look at the lists of officers, journal editors, and administrative committee members, there is an obvious, and for me unacceptable, absence of people of color. Do we have equal opportunity? Yes. Folks can self-nominate or be nominated for any leadership role. However, our formal leadership structure, for the most part, is notable for the absence of people of color. What is it about the climate within our web that may not be inviting? May not seem supportive? Might not be viewed as the most important place to invest personal time and energy?

As I finish speaking with you tonight, I begin spinning my way back toward the periphery of SCA and into the center of another related web that focuses on training and development, my second profession. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve our Association. And, as concerned as I am about the lack of diversity among our leadership, I am genuinely confident to be leaving our future in the hands of the four "J's"—sounds like a jazz quartet—Jim Chesebro, Juddi Trent, John Daley, and Jim Gaudino.

I'm going to leave you with the words of Robert Fulghum in *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives*:

As with other important things, I learned about this in kindergarten. Or, I should say, I finally understood it by being with little children.

When my first son was in kindergarten, I was a parent volunteer who visited the school once a week to teach folk songs to the children. Singing came between naptime and snacktime. Regularly, I was invited to stay after singing and join the class for milk and cookies. I gladly stayed. Not because I was particularly hungry, but because I enjoyed watching the children carry out this ordinary task with such extraordinary care.

Since learning community cooperation is an essential part of kindergarten, the children took turns bringing cookies from home. Each day every child had an essential job in this sharing.

Two children set the table with napkins and cups. Two others arranged chairs. Others went to the refrigerator for cartons of milk, while two more fetched the cookies from the cupboard and arranged them neatly on plates. One child was responsible for placing something in the middle of the table to talk about during the snack—anything the child wished, but something the others might appreciate, as well. Show and tell.

For half the class, their job for the day was being good guests. Saying, "Yes, please, I would like to have some milk," and "Thank you very much," and "How nice the table looks." An important task.

When all were served, everyone was expected to sit quietly for a moment, with hands folded in lap, until the teacher said, "Let's share." Each "host" took a cookie off his plate, broke it in half, and gave it to a "guest" before eating the other half himself.

During this snacktime, they discussed the "think about" object in the center of the table—a book, a goldfish in a bowl, a toy, [a web, a spider] whatever. After the cookies and milk were consumed, the children who had played "guests" for the day cleaned up and put away everything, before all went out to play.

The children did this efficiently and unselfconsciously—it was their routine. I, too, took the event seriously. It was a high point in my week.

# Literacy celebrated minus speaking and listening

by Roy Berko

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Each year September 8 is celebrated as International Literacy Day. The purpose of the day is to celebrate the importance of literacy around the world. A conference is held in Washington, D.C., and is covered by C-Span, National Public Radio, and almost all newspapers. An international literacy award is given by the International Reading Association (IRA), with the co-sponsorship of UNESCO.

Challenged to create a plan for dealing with the 90 million functioning illiterates in this country, conference participants from every major academic field decided that improving training for teachers, paying more attention to individuals with disabilities, working for systematic change through the education system, and doing research as a guide for development of programs, were some of the ways to combat the problem.

**At no time during the entire day did one speaker, did one declaration, recognize speaking and listening as part of literacy!** *Reading* and *writing* were the key words used over and over.

Why was this the case? I asked that question in a discussion group. The answers: "We don't know how to test a person's speaking and listening;" "Teachers aren't trained to teach oral communication;" "The only place in the educational system that oral communication is stressed is in colleges

and universities, and maybe not even there;" and "We all know that oral communication and listening are important, but, traditionally, reading and writing get the attention."

Why is speaking and listening not included in the recognition of literacy? Here are my guesses:

- When the noble forefathers of SCA left the National Council of Teachers of English in 1914, they generally abandoned speech communication education below the university level to others. No organized group picked up the challenge, and therefore, while speaking, listening and media literacy were left in the main to flounder, reading and writing flourished under the leadership of IRA and NCTE.
- Little research has centered on how to teach individuals to be literate speakers, listeners and media consumers from childhood through secondary school.
- Most of our speech communication education training schools have disappeared. The present *Speech Communication Association Graduate Directory* lists only 39 colleges and universities which have graduate programs in Speech Communication Education. Many of these indicate that they teach communication education courses but do not have a major track in the area.
- If not for drama, debate, and forensics extracurricular programs, most high schools would have few faculty whose work centers significantly on speech communication.
- Almost no elementary schools have speech

communication studies experts on their staffs.

- While most schools of education offer language arts methods classes, these tend to center on teaching reading and writing. Few methods courses in speaking, listening and media literacy are being offered to future elementary and secondary teachers.
- Few members of our profession profess to be trainers of teachers who will go into the elementary and secondary schools to spread the gospel of speaking, listening and media literacy.
- Little research stresses testing and evaluation of speaking and listening competencies for children and teens.
- NCTE gets massive publicity from granting its "Doublespeak Award." It has assisted and encouraged testing services to evaluate the level of writing literacy. Once it determines that there are deficiencies, the academics in the field design programs to "cure" the problem. They hunt down moneys to fund programs to cure writing literacy. The reading community also is proactive. The IRA sponsors Literacy Day and programs like "Read Right Now" which enrolls over 400,000 during each summer's activities. Both NCTE and IRA constantly pepper the media with announcements regarding the need to teach reading and writing in the elementary and secondary schools. They have bridged partnerships with the likes of UNESCO and large corporations to support literacy programs. On the other hand, though well intentioned, most of our profession's efforts result in *our* talking to *ourselves*. Awards are given at *our* convention to *our* members. *Our* publications cater to *our* membership. Much of our graduate school education perpetuates the training of individuals to enter the collegiate academic communication arena.

Yes, Literacy Day 1995 was another of those days when I sat through sessions feeling frustrated. Frustrated because those of us who are involved in speech communication studies may have steered it from fulfilling a very important task—educating young children and teens. Frustrated because we seem to speak to the converted, rather than proselytizing others to the importance of what we study. Frustrated because while academics in our parallel fields seem concerned about identifying inadequacies and molding young minds to be literate in reading and writing, the majority of our researchers, writers, and experts do little to assist in achieving speaking, listening and media literacy among children.

## Web of Inclusion

RATLIFFE from page 7

A lovely, sane moment with people—never mind our difference in age.

The finest, simplest elements of civilization at work.

It served as an example of the way daily habits become sacred rites. For me, it was communion.

The sacraments are defined by the church as "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace." Cookies and milk with those children became a sacrament for me. Grace was clearly present. It was a ritual reminder that civilization depends on sharing resources in a just and human fashion. This is not kid stuff.

Our second annual President's All-Convention Celebration is about to

begin. Please join me in continuing to spin our web of inclusion. Communication is community. Communication can be communion. Come. Let's share.

### References

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