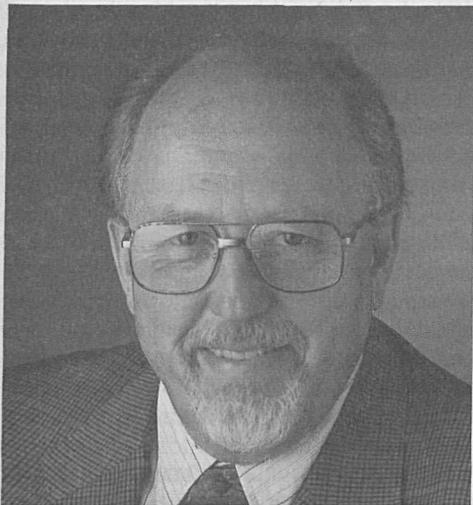


*1994 Presidential Address***“Teaching Unity Through Diversity”**

Bruce E. Gronbeck
SCA Immediate Past President

Tonight, I will advance a very simple and yet a very complex proposition. To those of you who see it only as a simple proposition, I will ask you to look at it from perspectives other than your personal viewpoint—from the multiple perspectives of an enlarged community. To those of you who see it only as a complex, even a stunningly unworkable, proposition, I will remind

you that to take no action in the face of difficulties is to act negatively; nonaction has consequences every bit as significant as action.

The simple proposition is this: it is time for us to quit thinking of multiculturalism, diversity, hate speech, and the other aspects of strained social relations as only political questions, and to start thinking of them as communication problems.

The difficulties only begin, however, when one accepts the simple proposition as a call for some new educational objectives coupled with concrete teaching strategies: *for, if we are to regard questions of multiculturalism, diversity, judgments about political correctness, and hate speech as communication problems, to what educational activities are we committing ourselves?*

We witness daily now what's been termed the battle between “multi-culti” and “anti-multi-culti” literateurs, social critics who belittle the army of “diversity trainers” descending upon American business, and conferences such as one being held on my own campus even as I speak devoted to In Query/In Theory/In Deed. And meanwhile, Nazis try to organize Iowa farmers, the University of New Hampshire tries to fire a professor for using sexual analogies in his lectures, and a man runs for the mayoralty of Dubuque, Iowa, by attacking gamblers and their whores, Black cops, and Irish lasses he calls no better than grunting swine in his newspaper ads. Harvard on one coast and Stanford on the other shoot off their canons in pitched battles over core curricula, and deans all over the country bemoan their inability to find new humanities faculty members who do *anything* but cultural studies. And, of course, several of you will make James Finn Garner's new book, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, a favorite holiday gift item this December.

I mean to suggest that our society, our educational institutions, and our scholarly foundations are riddled with what Mary Ann Glendon called *Rights Talk* in her book on the legal foundations of class rights in America, and that we cannot escape what Robert Hughes has identified in his best-seller as the *Culture of Complaint*. The issues are so numerous and ugly as to defy classification, but I'll try.

I'll sort some of my pet points of social agitation into three categories—into the Three I's of instructional, institutional, and intellectual communication problems. The instructional challenge is how to teach multiculturalism in a responsible way in our classrooms. The institutional goal must be to diversify our classrooms and this association—which currently must be somewhere around 85 percent white. And, the intellectual puzzle is how to refigure and even retheorize human communication in light of multicultural challenges to the paradigm we inherited from a Greek city-state not much bigger than most of your campuses.

Let me begin, however, with the simple proposition: we must quit saying that multiculturalism and talk about social rights are simply matters of liberal politics, while hate speech and worries about repressive attitudes over political correctness are simply matters of conservative politics. To those of you who really believe you can wash your hands of such matters, and continue in your public speaking classes to encourage your students to give speeches on how to macrame plant hangers, I must tell you that that's not good enough. Society demands that you teach your students to do more than tie knots.

Society needs you as well to teach them how to untie knots—the screaming matches and now gun shots that occur in front of the Planned Parenthood office, the controversy that ensues when the *Campus Review* at the University of Iowa publishes a front-page cartoon of Bart Simpson with an AK-47 snarling “Die, Faggot!”, the bitter taunts of male graduate students who complain that women will get all the good jobs this year even as those women still find it remarkably difficult to secure tenure especially at graduate institutions.

The kinds of demonstration speeches you have an obligation to encourage have nothing to do with macrame, perfect fudge every time, or how to set up a functional study area in a dorm room. Now, those might be fine topics for the kid with few skills, but you'd better be leading that young woman or young man before the end of the term to the important kinds of demonstration speeches—speeches that show blacks and whites, men and women, straights and gays, rich and poor, left and right, saints and sinners, and smart and dumb people how to confront the issues that divide them.

The demand that teachers of the communication arts drive their students to the deepest issues in hopes that those students will become the instruments of social repair is as old as Isocrates's school in Athens. When defending himself and his pedagogy at age eighty-two, Isocrates in *Antidosis* reminded his accusers why he was a speech teacher:

[B]ecause there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by [humans] which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another. (*Anti.* 254-5)

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The demonstration speeches called for by Isocrates were speeches offered by well-taught students showing how sensitivity and wisdom ought to be employed to solve the problems of the state. He recognized as well, that, for you and me, teachers “reap [their] finest and . . . largest reward when [their] pupils prove to be honorable and intelligent and highly esteemed by their fellow-citizens” (*Anti*. 220) I hope that I need not remind you that the social politics of diversity embeds the issues that students who are honorable and intelligent and highly esteemed simply must assault.

If the simple proposition that we as communication professionals need to teach our students to tackle publicly the social divisions of our age, the complex proposition remains: how? How should we go about the task for which our society has sent us its young? How ought we to help our students and their parents to live socially constructive lives? Let me move to the Three I’s, to instructional, institutional, and intellectual challenges we face in the Age of Diversity.

The Instructional Challenge

Hitting us where we are five days a week are the instructional challenges of social politics. From the start, in all of our classrooms, we must help our students understand precisely what social politics is. They must understand that what we’ve learned all too clearly, in the last five years especially, is not only is the personal political, but so is the social. To say that the social is political is to say that all of the markers of social or class differences between us—race, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, educational level, physical and mental capabilities—have become grounds for social agitation, legislative action, and judicial ruling.

In my lifetime we have witnessed a breathtakingly unprecedented expansion of the notion of personal and social rights. Civil rights granted by law in the 1950s and 1960s were soon extended to criminals. The concern for women’s rights grew as quickly as did the National Organization for Women in the 1960s and 1970s, especially with the coming of equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation under President Lyndon Johnson. That legislation, in turn, opened the sluices for appeals to individual and class rights based on freedom from discrimination in such arenas as

- competitive sports
- mortgage financing
- the preservation of ethnic heritage
- combat service in the military
- sexual harassment
- non-smokers’ rights
- pedestrian rights
- the rights of the mothers and unborn fetuses—

and the list goes on and on. A year ago, *Mother Goose and Grimm* featured the joke renaming a classic fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Vertically Challenged Men* and Garry Trudeau in *Doonesbury* attacked the Navy’s unwillingness to abandon its Tailhook convention in spite of its infamy.

The broadest legislation of all passed in 1991. The Americans with Disabilities Act set as a goal freedom from all discrimination, requiring the full organization of public space around the needs of the “environmentally challenged,” a phrase vague enough to

guarantee future suits destined to keep this nation’s army of lawyers busy through most of the next century.

Now, let me be clear here: I certainly am not attacking the notion of rights. Rather, I want us to focus on the consequences that are directly relevant to communication studies. Because Americans attach the concept of civil rights directly to individuals and individuals in multiple classes, rights talk as Mary Ann Glendon argues is ultimately and decisively fragmenting. She notes that Europeans attach notions of rights to groups, together with responsibilities that must be lived out if the rights are to be granted. Not so in the United States.

If everyone has a series of rights based on their individuality and, these days, their membership in multiple groups, and if those rights become absolute, then there is little to bind us together. And this leads to the New Segregation that Garry Trudeau probed in his spring cartoons on the fraternity member who sued his math teacher because he got a B, arguing that he had been discriminated against as a Greek American.

In this country, not only has the personal become political, but so has the social. And if the social is political, then we are in danger of defining all of our relationships to each other in political terms. And if all of our relationships to each other are political, then we are likely to go through life playing a zero-sum game, as I gather up to me what I want to make mine even though I have to take it away from you. Contrary to John Donne’s sentiment, every man and every woman then becomes an island.

And I’m here to tell you that, so far as I can see, there’s only one way to downgrade these political fevers to the status of functional sociality. We have to talk well. Such was the view that Representative Barbara Jordan took when addressing the Democratic party convention of 1976, quoting this passage from Thomas Jefferson: “Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and that affection without which liberty and even life are but dreary things.”

Restoring social harmony is not a matter of bald-headed white men being nice to corn-rowed Black women, of Americans becoming more polite when interacting with foreigners from all bands of the rainbow. Social harmony is not a matter of etiquette, though I suppose that’s at least a start.

No, we must teach our students much, much more than Miss Manners. Teaching social harmony, teaching unity through diversity, can never involve the erasure of difference. That, after all, is one of the ways we got into trouble in the first place. As Thomas Jefferson and Barbara Jordan knew, we must learn to talk with each other, to live with each other, within the matrix of our differences. And, my friends, it’s your job to do the teaching.

In interpersonal communication classes, you must be teaching not only the exploration of self-identity, of but other-identity. As Edward Sampson said in *Celebrating the Other*, “no one voice can be quieted without losing the greatest opportunity of all: to converse with otherness and to learn about our own otherness in and through those conversations.” I must learn in your classrooms not only how I feel about myself but how I feel about women and African Americans and Asians and Hispanics and gay men. With your help, my images of otherness must be brought into focus if I’m ever going to have fruitful and mutually rewarding conversations and business transactions with those others. And likewise, until a Native American or South Sea Islander has examined her deep-seated attitudes toward me and I, toward her,

we never will have a completely satisfying discussion about careers or politics.

In public speaking classes, audience analysis simply must get much more sophisticated. You must teach students that demographic differences between people—differences of race, class, and gender, especially—run a good deal deeper than folks' attitudes toward athletics, governmental programs, mechanical puzzles, and Mozart. Racial, class, and gender differences affect not only attitudes but ways of seeing and acting in the world. Unless that eighteen-year-old kid from Shueyville, Iowa, is taught something about how the world looks from the black, poor, female side of the fence, he'll never be able to or want to pull that fence down. And his homophobic fears for his own sexual identity will prevent him from taking gay and lesbian lifestyles into account in his six-minute speech on how to stop the spread of AIDS unless he understands something about those lifestyles. And, too, if he doesn't comprehend that speeches with introductions, bodies, and conclusions, thesis statements, and statistics are products of Euro-American culture, he'll think an African call-and-response exchange is primitive rather than the way another society negotiates its public business. If you don't prepare this kid for a socially variegated world, he'll never get out of Shueyville.

In media and film criticism classes, the ways in which women are portrayed as loose or homebound, gays as sex-starved, Mexicans as greasers, Blacks as pimps, and Chinese as inscrutable in dominant American mass media had better be one of the topics of your syllabi. In communication education courses, James Carey's spring 1992 article in the *Journal of Communication* on political correctness and cultural studies ought to be required reading. In media and the law classes, you simply must wrestle with questions of both the social and legal status of hate speech. Unless the haters and the hatees explore in your classroom the communal and the constitutional issues surrounding sickening but free speech, their mutual hate will only drive both groups to more desperate action.

Theatre and performance studies classes can be among your most deeply moving arenas for teaching unity through diversity, given the stock of novels, letters, poems, and plays touching such a theme. And you can think bigger than your own classroom as well. Take those scenes and scripts into the community.

This is what the Speech Communication Association, under the leadership of Past President David Zarefsky and Associate Director Bill Eadie, is doing in applying for a National Endowment for the Humanities public program grant. We want to assemble pieces of video, theatre, and oral performance that evoke women and African Americans from the past, bring their voices to publics today, and enlarge the conversation about where we are on the issues that have split us by race and gender. That's teaching unity through diversity in the classroom and in our communities.

The Institutional Challenge

The institutional challenges posed by multiculturalism, diversity, hate speech, and debates over political correctness are just as daunting as the instructional challenges. Yet, challenges can become grand opportunities.

As a field or even as the multiple fields we may actually be, communication studies has come far in the last twenty five years, building its caucuses, filing a friend of the court brief in a free speech case, diversifying its executive and academic leadership, and creating space within its publications for multiple scholarly-activist voices. This association once went so far as to put a woman on the presidential ballot by petition, making Anita Taylor truly the woman of the people.

Yet, for all of our progress, we have much to do. Because I sit at the pinnacle of this association's pyramid tonight, let me talk about some longterm actions we ought to contemplate. If we are going to diversify the Speech Communication Association in significant ways, we're going to have to get more creative. The SCA student club network that we are about to launch is a start to more aggressive on-campus recruitment, but only a start. We must dream bigger dreams than that. For starters, I would suggest:

1. That the SCA caucuses—Women's Caucus, Black Caucus, Gay and Lesbian Concerns Caucus, La Raza Caucus, and the Asian/Pacific American Caucus—start drives to finance SCA scholarships for outstanding juniors or senior majors from among the populations they focus on. We simply must recruit undergraduates at those stages into our graduate programs, and sponsorship of national scholarly competitions is good for our reputation.

2. That the SCA through its caucuses or through the Research Board sponsor a series of undergraduate and graduate student conferences on research topics relevant to the life experiences and intellectual interests of members of underrepresented minorities.

3. That the Elementary and Secondary Education section—or any of the others, for that matter—undertake study and then implementation of communication workshops and demonstrations that can be taken into elementary and middle schools with large minority populations. Bringing into schools student presentations constructed around film and video, computer CD-ROM interactions, oral and dramatic performance, and communication games would accomplish much by dramatizing the role of communication activities in their lives and bringing our professionals and our students in contact with them.

4. That the SCA, through the good offices of its Black Caucus and its Senior College and University section, explore relationships between full service speech communication programs and the historically Black colleges and universities without speech communication majors. More generally, we know that there is a pool of talented members of underrepresented minority students who have no access to what we teach. We need to build magnet student exchanges, targeted institutes and seminars, and even faculty exchange programs so as to expose such students to our subject matters and visions.

5. That the SCA recognize that it is a thoroughly Americanist professional association, one that could profitably diversify itself through international recruitment and exchange. We have made some strides in this direction through the CIDD international debates, the WorldNet convention programs, our gifts of journals to foreign libraries, and our work on a new class of membership suited to foreign professionals. Our outreach program, however, thus far has a strong Euro-Russian emphasis. We have miles to go before we sleep. We will be rewarded when we get there, as was seen graphically by those of you who witnessed the keynote conversation between Margaret Lessing and Zonde Mathe-Charle of South Africa.

The bottom line here is that we will not diversify our frontline teaching corps until we bring into our undergraduate classrooms and then graduate seminars the kinds of students whom we can call to membership in that corps. And we will not represent all of speech communication studies until we tear through the Eurocentric membrane that encloses our operations.

As an institution directly beholden to elementary, middle school, and high school speech communication programs as well as to community, four-year, and graduate colleges and universities, the

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Speech Communication Association must become a point of educational unity around which the social diversity of this country and others can be organized. Insofar as questions of multiculturalism, hate speech, and concerns about political correctness are both communication problems and opportunities, the Speech Communication Association must not sidestep its institutional potential to foster social unity.

The Intellectual Challenge

I come now to the intellectual challenge of diversity, which for me, at least, may be the most difficult set of problems confronting us an educational enclave. Pedagogically, I have found it easy to call for a recognition of the need to teach true individual, social, and political pluralism. Institutionally, I have been most comfortable during my presidency advocating recruitment and outreach, for it's a message I've preached through most of my professional life. But the intellectual challenge of diversity is quite a different matter.

In my case, the first challenge to how I think about knowledge and the life of the mind came in the spring of 1970. The campus of the University of Michigan was rocked by the Black Action Movement and its series of non-negotiable demands. In the midst of those strained times, I was feeling pretty good about what I was doing in my class in argumentation—a perfect site, I thought, for debate over the issues.

Then came that fateful day in April when an African American introduced the matter of institutional racism into the discussion. I was totally unprepared for the concept. I could understand and be appropriately angry about the racist dimensions of many different kinds of actions taken by whites, even by myself. But I was dumbfounded by the charge that governmental, religious, economic, and, yes, even liberal educational institutions were structured in and operated through white mechanisms. The idea that even our most basic assessment instruments—the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and the usual battery of intelligence tests—were evaluating life experiences rather than cognitive abilities was revolutionary.

A similar set of arguments, albeit in much more elaborate form, came before all of us in the November issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. The lead article in that issue was written by one of my former students, one of my present colleagues, and a friend of theirs. Professors Carole Blair, Julie Brown, and Leslie Baxter constructed a bonafide lead essay for a scholarly journal: it is consistently argued, documented by authority and example, passionate, and productive of counterargument. It ends with a section labeled “Conclusions/Continuations,” wherein Blair, Brown, and Baxter attempt to nail down three planks in a feminist view of scholarship and knowledge even while calling for additional scholarly conversation.

Like that African American student in my classroom in 1970, Blair, Brown, and Baxter accuse all of us, themselves included, of something akin to institutional racism; they charge us with defining knowledge from a masculinist paradigm. That paradigm features (1) impersonal abstraction, that is, a male-centered logic of universal principles and objectivity; (2) disciplinary territoriality, that is, knowledge organized into discrete fields governed by particular perspectives; (3) individuation, wherein knowledge is understood as created by individuals and in a climate where older males sponsor and mentor younger males in formal and informal networks; and (4) hierarchy, where the amount of publication one

does—especially compared to others—is a measure of importance and a means to discipline other people.

The charge that our intellectual practices are inherently racist and sexist suggests that not only is the personal and the social political, but so is the professional. Blair, Brown, and Baxter are explicit on this matter. They say that “Feminist stances of any ilk simply *are* political,” and that “feminist stances cannot necessarily respect traditional science” (p. 401). They finally argue even that “the writing practices that mark what counts as scholarly discourses in this field must not be maintained without scrutiny” (p. 402).

I leave it to you to read the rest of this essay, and, for that matter, the review essay at the end of the November number, wherein Ken Burke, Nancy Burroughs-Denhart, and Glen McClish detail the struggle between androgeny- and gender-driven conceptions of women's communication processes. And then, for good measure, flip to the book reviews and get yourself introduced to James Woods' new book, *The Corporate Closet: The Professional Lives of Gay Men in America* (1993), where it is argued that heterosexuality is “penalizing, hiding, and otherwise ‘symbolically annihilating’ its alternatives” (p. 9).

Is deductive argument masculine, and inductive argument, feminine? Is science male and criticism female? Must what we call knowledge be either absolutely detachable from the contexts of its creation, or is it worthwhile only when we understand that all knowledge is grounded in context? If all knowledge is ultimately political at least in how it can be used, and perhaps even more fundamentally than that, then how are we to assess it? What general standards outside of mere voting are available when it comes time to evaluate political knowledge? Will political correctness be equated with cognitive accuracy? Most generally, if and when we finally bring down the Enlightenment mechanisms—now called the masculinist paradigm—for creating natural and social knowledge, with what will we replace it?

If the dominant styles of communication in this and other countries are masculinist, heterosexual, and even bourgeois, and if our scholarly assumptions and methods of research are likewise tainted by markers of power, what should be our responses as an intellectual community? Once we accept the critique of domination, then what? Multiple standards arising from varied social situations? No standards at all? Or what?

I have no answers tonight. That perhaps is because the intellectual challenge of diversity is the teacher-scholar's most difficult problem. If I respond to Blair, Brown, and Baxter, I am liable to employ masculinist forms of argument, and hence my discourse will serve as testament to the position I am probing. Therefore, the intellectual challenge of diversity is our tightest knot because our understanding of knots themselves has been destroyed by it. I may well have no means by which to respond to such argument.

For all these difficulties, however, talk we must. I know that the dialogue must be engaged specifically, that we must soon push past the critique of domination to a critique of freedom, to a new form of intellectual unity that arises from rather than fights off our diversity. We must reengage the battles of Plato vs. Aristotle, of *episteme* vs. *doxa*, of knowledge vs. opinion.

A New Beginning

My last comment, perhaps, captures the one notion that I want to drive home most firmly: *like all other academic disciplines and like all other institutions in society, communication studies must*

come to understand that we are not fragmented by diversity, but rather defined by it. The social world must be seen for what it really is, as a collectivity composed of all of the people all of the time. And insofar as John Dewey was correct almost a century ago when he reminded us that society is not created *through* communication but rather *in* the very process of interaction, then you and I have some special and exceedingly important jobs ahead.

Through our teaching, our educational outreach, and our research, we must help the society that gives us its young to refigure itself as a functional community. We must build community. We must convince that society, as Jeffrey Escoffier has argued, that “*public* discussion offers a form of social objectivity and makes the participants accountable to the communities engaged.” If we are to break through the politics of exclusion, the politics of hate, the politics of repression, and the politics of complaint, we must become in one way or another communitarians. We must teach our students and our colleagues how to redefine and reinstitute a sense of joint commitments. We must dedicate ourselves to social values that include rather than exclude, to dialogue rather than dialectic, to freedom rather than repression, and to mutual problem solving rather than separatism. Social values must be not simply recited but must be argued out in all arenas of our professional lives.

In all this, we must be careful to avoid what Charles Derber of Boston College calls PMC communitarianism—a professional middle class communitarianism that reflects the life situations only of those people with enough money, education, security, and freedom to make autonomous choices. “Communitarianism,” Derber notes, “must move out from the halls of academe to the bowling alleys, taverns, and street corners if it is to do more than absorb gallons of printing ink.” I agree.

The division between the overclasses and underclasses of this country might destroy any hope for an American community, for

a moral vision wide enough to let us see all of our boundaries. Perhaps. I am convinced, however, that only a citizenry educated in the arts of speaking, writing, listening, reading, and viewing will be able to articulate and act upon such a vision.

That is your challenge: to find unity through diversity in your classrooms, professional activities, and investigations into the dynamics of human communication. Your challenge is to live out another sentiment Barbara Jordan quoted in her keynote address of 1976, this time from Abraham Lincoln: “As I would not be a slave, neither would I be a master.” Through such a communal commitment, the communication arts and sciences become the engines of both collective good and individual fulfillment.



SCA's 1994 President, Bruce Gronbeck, received the President's Gavel from Sharon Ratliffe.

SCA Summer Conference

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