

**ESTABLISHING, NURTURING, PROPAGATING, AND MARKETING OUR
CONNECTIONS IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION**

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We are each of us angels with only one wing; we can only fly by embracing each other.
Italian poet Luciano de Crescenzo

In late 2006, I conducted a Google search using the following search terms: connection, agricultural education, agricultural communication, extension, and leadership. The fifth result was “Transforming University Programs of Agricultural Education,” the 1992 Distinguished Lecture for AAAE by L. H. Newcomb (1993). Another “backsight” that I used as I prepared for this wonderful honor was “Field Notes: A Topographical Survey of Our Professional Society,” the 1993 Distinguished Lecture for AAAE by Glen C. Shinn (1994). How appropriate for me to find these two outstanding papers: They mark the midpoint of my professional active membership in AAAE. My membership in this wonderful organization began in 1977 or 1978 while I was an instructor (1977) or new assistant professor (1978) at Iowa State University. Little did I know then that 30 years later I would be an “old hand” in this marvelous profession and professional organization. In fact, even in 1992 and 1993, I had no idea that I’d ever be selected for this most humbling assignment and opportunity.

In both addresses, the two distinguished lecturers told us as a profession where we ought to be going, what we ought to be doing, and how we should look in the future. I wish I could do that. Quite frankly, I just do not feel qualified enough to do so. But what I do hope that I can do is explore with you some of the means that we should use to get wherever it is that we’re going. Actually, perhaps it’s better described as **one** way that we should go. I believe that relationships are more critical to our success than tasks and time. So, what I hope to do with your help today is to explore those relationships—

relationships that I’ll simply call “connections.”

And, yes, there are some academics to my contention—my contention that connections are important. First, let’s examine the concept of social networking. The notion of six degrees has become part of our collective consciousness. The most common manifestation of this notion is the so-called six degrees of Kevin Bacon—a game based on the idea that no celebrity is further removed from Kevin Bacon than six degrees (or steps) of separation. The Oracle of Bacon (University of Virginia Computer Science, n.d.) is a computer program that uses the Internet Movie Database to figure out how far any actor is from Kevin Bacon—or any other actor, for that matter! An academic version of the game involves calculating a Number, a measure of one’s closeness to a prolific and somewhat transient mathematician of the 20th century named Paul Erdős. An Erdős Number of 1 is assigned to an author who co-wrote a paper with Paul Erdős, a 2 to one who wrote with one of Erdős’ co-authors, etc. So, can we do that in our field of study? Who might be our Paul Erdős? I would offer two of our professionals: One is the former distinguished lecturer, Dr. Glen C. Shinn. Another could be Dr. H. Rob Terry, Jr. I urge you to play around with the concept to see how closely connected we are—even in our scholarship.

The belief that it takes six steps to connect any two folks in our field of study is, in my experience, ludicrous. In fact, if you would like to participate in a large scale examination of the principle, join the Small World project, an Internet-based experiment to test the notion that any two people in the

whole world can be connected in six or fewer steps. Try the URL: <http://smallworld.columbia.edu/> to sign up and participate in the small world project.

Seldom do we really know with whom and where we might connect in meaningful ways. Here's one personal example. I teach a graduate class at Texas A&M University on data analysis and interpretation. We use SPSS extensively to connect to real data sets and real problems in analyzing and interpreting data and results. I use a paperback text titled *Discovering Statistics Using SPSS* authored by Andy Field (2005). A colleague in another department at TAMU suggested that the text was too elementary for graduate studies; it was an UNDERgraduate text. Now, what does all this have to do with "connections"? In November 2006, colleagues and I were invited to the home of an Armenian professor for dinner. The invitation came through a third party; we had no idea who the professor was. Arriving at his home, we discovered that he was a statistician, and he had studied under Professor Kolmogorov, a noted Russian mathematician and statistician for whom the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests are named. I had first encountered the procedures in a graduate course at TAMU in 1972. I was intrigued particularly by the NAME of the test! Again, what's the REAL connection? After meeting the professor and his wife, I turned to his bookcase—in the foyer of his small flat—and there was the same paperback text by Andy Field. I just HAD to ask him about it. He ALSO used it as a textbook in his classes in Yerevan, Armenia, and his evaluation of the book was the same as mine: clear, easy reading, well written with humor interjected. Partly because of my connection with a noted statistician—who was connected with a world-renowned statistician, I felt okay with my use of the book as a text. Yes, I realize that all of us do not need confirmation of our actions from others, but it helps me! My connection with Professor Alex Simoyan provides support for me professionally.

Warren Bennis (1999) wrote,

In a society as complex and technologically sophisticated as ours, the

most urgent projects require the coordinated contributions of many talented people working together. ... There are simply too many problems to be identified and solved, **too many connections to be made** [emphasis mine] (p. 73)

Dr. Bennis understands the importance of connections in our professional lives. Further, if those connections are to be valuable in solving problems, the people with whom we connect must have skills and knowledge different than our own. Thus, in using our connections professionally to solve problems, we are reminded of the omnipotence of diversity. We simply must connect with people diverse from ourselves in hopes of increasing collective competence, abilities, and performance. Integrated specializations—that is, diverse knowledge that is connected—are invaluable. In light of what we know about the changing demographics of this nation, it is critical that we connect with people who are different than us ethnically and culturally. And, I urge us to do so—to make those connections, to develop those relationships with tolerance, with civility, with understanding, and, ultimately, with celebration.

A level of connectivity that I and—quite frankly, I believe—many of us lack is with our world. Most recognize the importance of internationalization and globalization; how we operationalize those is another matter. We must reach out beyond our borders to connect with our neighbors across the world so that we can understand and exploit megatrends such as environmental degradation and decreased biodiversity; poverty, hunger, and sickness; migration, emigration, immigration, and seamless borders; and international terrorism and conflict.

Connections to people—the “education” part of “agricultural education” is, I believe, the most important dimension of interactivity. But we must not forget our context either. Our context is “agriculture” and its many derivatives. Be it sows, cows, and plows or rockets, rhododendrons, and rabbits, our very existence is connected to the broad industry of agriculture. As fewer

and fewer of our population engage in production agriculture, some have come to believe that agriculture—and the connected activities of learning concepts and processes, adopting new technologies, communicating advances, extending knowledge, and leading people in that industry—has become less important. Those of us in agriculture and in agricultural education in its broadest sense know otherwise. As the general public drifts further and further from agrarian roots, we have a larger and larger responsibility to help them connect back to our source of food, of air, of potable water, of nature and natural environment, and of the wonders of animal and plant life. Not only must we remain connected to agriculture, but we also must help an increasingly unknowing public to do so. For me, that connection to agriculture—in my case, animal agriculture, primarily—is both a professional role and an avocational, almost recreational role. How **you** connect to agriculture is important. Ensure that you do!

At the same time, we should recognize that many people connect to agriculture in ways that we believe are misconceived. Some people attribute human qualities or characteristics to animals. This concept, anthropomorphism, results in groups who believe that animals have the same rights as humans. We as agriculturists and educators and communicators and extensionists and leaders must delve deeply into philosophical constructs and ideals underpinning, for example, rights-based versus utilitarian-based philosophies. Again, we must connect with and clarify our basic beliefs and ideals as we provide stewardship to our resources—plant, animal, soil, water, light, climate—so that we can continue to feed and clothe and shelter the human race.

There is another important professional reason to connect with agriculture. Experiential learning, learning by doing, the project method, adoption-diffusion, and even experimental design and statistics all have roots in the context of agrarianism. While some may argue that the reason they were connected to agriculture is that our world was largely an agrarian one at the time, I would argue that the tools and concepts and practices that were derived in agriculture in the past are just as relevant

there today. In fact, they may be even more critical as different segments of society seem to drift further and further apart; that is, they are less connected to our agricultural roots. I remind myself, and I urge you, to remain connected to the science and practice and industry of agriculture as a context in which to develop and test our theories and to apply our knowledge.

An increasingly diverse and complex world makes connections—to make sense of, to understand, and to solve problems—increasingly important. Perhaps in the past, our world was simple enough and monolithic enough that we didn't need to work on connections; we simply were already connected. Such is not the case today. Diversity and complexity provide spice and variety and interest; they also permit misunderstanding and distrust and fear. Let's examine one example of that diversity—generational. Some would say that this has always been the case. Yes, to some extent, that's accurate. In other ways, generational diversity is increasing. Why? For one, life spans have increased. The differences in ages are simply mathematically more now than in the past. And, if it's true that change occurs more rapidly today than yesterday, then the experiences and values and understandings of different generations are more pronounced. Relocation to other states and other countries has increased, causing magnification of differences between grandparents and grandchildren, for example. As integrative scientists (a term I borrowed from Dr. Norman Borlaug, 1970 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and a fellow faculty member at Texas A&M University), I believe that agricultural educators have special skills and abilities, and therefore special obligations, to connect generations. On a more personal level, I'd simply urge YOU to work with your students to understand both older generations and those younger than them. But perhaps the area in which we as professionals need to concentrate most is with our own families. Honor and respect parents and grandparents—if you are fortunate enough to still have them with you. As I advance in years, I am truly blessed that my parents are still with us. In fact, we are “business

partners” in a cattle operation (what else would it be in TEXAS in agriculture?). I am reminded almost daily that you’re never grown if you have a parent to remind you that you’re simply their/her/his child! Ah, it’s a mindset kind of thing; it’s trying to answer the question “how old would you be if you didn’t know when you were born?” At the same time, teach and encourage and model the way for those younger than you and I. That’s long been our professional obligation; make it a personal one as well.

Finally, I urge us to examine our institutional connectivity. In AAAE, with whom are we connected? Do we embrace all of those faculty members in departments of agricultural education, extension, leadership, communications—all those whose interests and expertise and subject matter content relate? Is agricultural education defined broadly enough and connected closely enough with its close kinfolks so it can and will survive and thrive as an integrated field of study? I offer the following as a beginning list of professional organizations and groups and entities within the United States and beyond with which the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) might and should connect:

- ACE (Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences)
- ACTE (Association for Career and Technical Education)
- ACTER (Association for Career and Technical Education Research)
- AIAEE (Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education)
- ALE (Association of Leadership Educators)
- NAAJ (North American Agricultural Journalists)
- NACTA (North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture)
- NCAE (National Council for Agricultural Education)

This is certainly an incomplete list. In fact, it’s not even designed to be an all-inclusive list. I invite you to add to the list, to continue to make connections, to expand our connectivity.

Connections—networking, linkages, associations, consortia, collaborators, whatever we deem the concept—are important. They are essential. Our very existence as a viable association depends on them. We as humans—as social beings—depend on them. Connect with each other and with others. Connect with people diverse to yourself—with tolerance, civility, understanding, and celebration. Increased diversity—particularly of thought—will improve our collective abilities and performance, especially in light of what we know about our changing demographics and our changing world. Connect with me. Make it (connecting) one of your passions. It has served me well. I hope to continue to connect with you—professionally and personally. Thank you for the opportunity to embrace with you so that collectively we may soar together to new heights.

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