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Nicole Sami
Roger Williams University

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The Rift Between Faiths: Evolution and Intelligent Design
Nicole Sami, Marine Biology ’08

Since President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was instituted on January 8, 2002, science curricula in public schools have been under scrutiny. The Act has opened the way for those who believe in creationism or other forms of coming-into-existence to question whether teaching just evolution is exclusionary. In his article “And Congress Said, Let There Be Other Views. Or Did It?” David Hoff states that “the members who wrote [the report accompanying the Act] believe curriculum 'should help students to understand the full range of scientific views that exist' on controversial topics, naming biological evolution specifically.” This statement, found in the report accompanying the Act, has caused some school boards to begin looking at alternatives to teaching evolution. One such alternative is the idea of intelligent design. Intelligent design is the concept in which aspects of creationism and evolution come together to form a single theory. Proponents of this theory believe that a higher being created the first forms of life and then over time these creatures adapted to different environments. Teaching intelligent design could potentially cause a problem within society, however: in a democratic society the belief that a person’s opinions should not be imposed upon by another individual is held in high respect. The question therefore becomes, should intelligent design be taught in American public schools?

The teaching of intelligent design is problematic because of a clash between people whose faith is based in God and those whose faith is based in science. Some people argue that intelligent design should not be taught within a public school. A recent New York Times editorial illustrates the view that this new idea has no scientific backing and should not be introduced to students “as a scientific alternative to one of the crowning theories of modern science” (“The Crafty”). Likewise in a letter to the editor, Donald Terndrup, an associate professor of Astronomy at Ohio State University, writes that he “remain[s] extremely skeptical that intelligent design can yet be claimed to be part of science [and it] will be a real science when we have testable answers for these questions.” The questions Terndrup refers to are whether the aspects of intelligent design came “from divine intervention, visits by space aliens, [or] magic.” For most, like Terndrup, skepticism that intelligent design can be scientifically validated is the reason why intelligent design should not be taught within public schools.

In contrast, some people argue that intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution within public schools. The National Center for Science Education has found that one school which supports the idea of teaching intelligent design and evolution side by side is the Patrick Henry Local School District in Ohio, where the district superintendent has been quoted “as saying students should ‘have the benefit of being taught both topics of evolution’.” Those who take this same view claim teaching both theories is a happy medium between the scientific community and the religious community since the curriculum would touch on the theory of evolution, which is accepted by the scientific community, and on the theory of intelligent design, which is accepted by the religious community as an addition to the theory of creationism.

Still others feel that intelligent design should be taught instead of evolution. The belief that evolution should not be taught has been around as long as the theory of evolution itself. For instance, Governor Miriam Ferguson of Texas from 1924-1926 claimed that being “a Christian mother [she was] not going to let that kind of rot go into Texas textbooks” (Jacoby). During her term in office Ferguson instituted censorship of Texas textbooks, and ever since, evolution has been under scrutiny. In her article “Caught Between Church and State,” Susan Jacoby notes that with the NCLB Act “anti-evolution crusaders [have regained hope] to force public school science classes to give equal time to religiously based speculations about the origins of life.” The argument in favor of intelligent design was recently brought up in Topeka, Kansas. According to Washington Post writer Peter Slevin, a group of scientists who support the theory of intelligent design stated that “modern Darwinian theory relies too much on unproven reasoning.” Slevin cites William S. Harris, an advocate of teaching alternative theories and a scientist who specializes in omega-3 fatty acids: “It would not be an ‘irresponsible deduction from the data’ to say the genetic code contained in DNA was produced by an intelligent ‘mind’.” Harris feels, as do other scientists, that the complexity of DNA, as well as the intricate functions of a cell, could not have formed and evolved separately, but rather this complex system had to be designed by a higher being. Harris’ support of intelligent design led him to take part in a science standards
committee that voted on whether or not to change the science curriculum to allow for alternative theories. Even though he spoke avidly for including intelligent design in the curriculum, the committee voted against changing it, Slevin reports.

The thought that both evolution and intelligent design should be taught side by side within the science curriculum is one with which I agree. Since I am a student of science, I feel strongly about evolution; however, I feel that it would be unfair to teach this as an unchallenged theory if other theories regarding how living things came to be exist. When I first began studying science, evolution was taught as an unchallenged theory. By the time I reached AP Biology in high school, though, alternative theories had been brought to the public's attention, and that was the first time I was exposed to other ideas. Instead of excluding these ideas as foolish and unworthy, my teacher decided to take the time to teach intelligent design along with evolution and creationism. By teaching all three theories in a nonbiased way, he was able to open up our eyes to other opinions and allowed us to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each theory.

My teacher was an avid supporter of analyzing a theory rather than accepting or dismissing it at face value. His approach to teaching was very much like what Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire called for when he “insiste[d] on consistency between democratic values... and classroom practices” (Shor 27). In his well-known book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire makes a distinction between the “banking” method of education and democratic dialogue. CUNY English professor Ira Shor explains that “problem-posing” is the key to Freire's pedagogy:

A Freirean critical teacher is a problem-poser who asks thought-provoking questions and who encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not something done to them. They are not empty vessels to be filled with facts, or sponges to be saturated with official information, or vacant bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus. (26)

For Freire, education is about liberation and in that way education is political. As Stanley Aronowitz, professor of Sociology and also at CUNY explains, problem-posing should liberate students from simply perpetuating the political status quo handed to them, unquestioned, from generation to generation (9).

When Freire wrote Pedagogy for the Oppressed, he referred to the economic and political oppression faced by his people, but students in American public schools potentially face a type of oppression as well, an oppression of critical thought, if they are not given the opportunity to learn how to analyze conflicting ideas. Incorporating intelligent design into the science curriculum would provide that opportunity, where through democratic dialogue students can gain the freedom of knowledge. The value of critical thought for this and future generations will be a priceless pillar of lifelong learning.

Notes

'This information, which is located in the article “School District Supports 'Intelligent Design,'” was obtained by the online source from the Northwest Signal.

Works Cited


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