How 'Bout Them Dogmas? An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding the Debate Between Creationism and Evolution

Kenneth S. Saladin
Georgia College and State University

Abstract
This paper describes a team-taught interdepartmental honors seminar on the controversy over evolution and creationism. Through research, class discussions, formal debates, and guest speaker, the students explored issues of American history, constitutional law, philosophy, theology, comparative mythology, theater, cinema, and diverse branches of natural science including biology, geology, paleontology, physics, biochemistry, and astronomy. This seminar serves as an example of how the critical analysis of pseudointellectual doctrines can have a uniquely stimulating and broadly interdisciplinary educational impact.

In academic life, we confront many pseudointellectual ideas that contend for public respect and sometimes even for a place in the curriculum. We have revisionist historians denying the Holocaust; cult archeologists telling us extraterrestrial visitors built the pyramids of Egypt; and creationists agitating for inclusion in biology classes. Our reactions to these cult ideologies range from the merely dismissive to organized political opposition, as in the ongoing creationism controversy in Cobb County, Georgia. But whatever the form of our rejection or opposition, it is usually implicit that we deny them a place in our teaching.

I will argue that even while we afford no academic credence to imposters, we can make good educational use of these controversies. We can use them to teach the legitimate content of our disciplines, and to do so with unusual effectiveness. My case in point is an interdisciplinary, team-taught honors seminar that I led in spring 2001 at Georgia College and State University (GC&SU). The theme of the seminar was the conflict between evolution and creationism.

An Issue That Refuses to Die

A seminar on this subject is timely and politically relevant. The public controversy rages unabated, and seems unlikely to go away any time soon. It is hardly necessary to point this out here in Cobb County, where the science faculty of Kennesaw State University so recently took the lead in trying to head off the introduction of so-called "Intelligent Design" creationism into the public school science curriculum.[1] Even the 2002 race for Georgia State School Superintendent was tinged by this controversy, as the winner, Kathy Cox, indicated that she is receptive to including creationism in science courses. Hardly a year goes by without a creationist bill being introduced in the Georgia legislature. Organizations no less than the National Academy of Sciences[2] and the American Association for the Advancement of Science[3] took stands against the Cobb County school board policy.

Newspaper editorial pages are often full of ill-informed opinion on this issue. If we want our students to be able to participate more meaningfully in this debate, it behooves us to educate them on the issue. That alone is one justification for such a seminar—but I think there are even greater ones, which is what I will address in this paper: Why did we teach this seminar, how did we structure it, and what were its outcomes and benefits?

Why Teach About Creationism?

Not for a minute do I think creationism is a valid scientific theory or alternative to evolution. Not for a minute do I advocate teaching it as a science. It was neither the purpose nor the effect of our seminar to lend credibility to creationism. Nevertheless, this conflict is a useful springboard for teaching some things about science and society. It provides an especially good opportunity for interdisciplinary teaching. Creationist rhetoric touches not only upon biology but also upon geology, paleontology, biochemistry, physics, astronomy, and a few other branches of natural science.

It is easy to scoff at the creationists' scientific arguments, but less easy to identify exactly what is wrong with them. Creationists say, for example, that the radiocarbon dates obtained from certain clams indicate that they had been dead for 2,000 years, and yet the clams in question were still alive, thus casting doubt on the reliability of radiometric dating. How many people know exactly how to answer that? By critically analyzing arguments like this, our students and even we can learn a lot. It is like teaching archeology by having students pick apart the arguments of von Däniken; teaching a little astronomy by critically analyzing astrology; teaching nutrition by analyzing the fallacies of fad diets; or teaching medical physiology by exposing the illogic of medical quackery.

But outside the natural sciences, the creationism conflict also touches upon important issues of American history, constitutional law, educational policy, politics, philosophy, theology, literature, and even theater and cinema. The exploration of creationism can be a fascinating intellectual journey. There are not many subjects that can tie together so many aspects of cultural and intellectual life.

Another benefit of teaching this course is that when we require students to articulate well-informed opinions on the subject and even to openly debate the issue in class, we can use it as a vehicle for teaching critical reasoning, persuasive self-expression, mutual respect, and civil discourse.

I never find students bored by this topic; our classroom discussions are very animated and interesting. This is not merely an academic subject to them. It impinges on most people's personal beliefs and values; most people have an opinion about it; and many people, especially in the enthusiasm of youth, enjoy discussing and debating it. Debate on a volatile issue like this has the potential to erupt into heated arguments. But I find that we can use that very peril to our advantage, by laying out and enforcing rules of civility, teaching people how to debate a hot issue without personal animosity.

In short, and in keeping with the mission of my university, this topic contains many elements of an excellent liberal arts education. It was in fact gratifying to me that our president, Rosemary DePaolo, held this seminar up as an exemplar of our liberal arts mission.

Format of the Course

All of the students in our Honors and Scholars Program at GC&SU are required to take two honors seminars. These are team teaching efforts. In our creation-evolution seminar, my fellow instructors were Dr. Rob Viau, Associate Professor of English and CETL director; and Dr. John Sallstrom, Professor of Philosophy and Religion and Associate Vice President for Academic Services. The three of us were better able to expose students to faculty insights and opinions from a variety of perspectives than faculty could from a single discipline, or even from just the natural sciences. Also very involved in the course was Dr. Doris Moody, Director of the Honors and Scholars Program, who handled a lot of the logistics of the course and provided funding.

In addition to these faculty, we had 11 guest speakers, some from our campus and some from places as distant as Boston and San Diego. This was possible because of the

strong support that President DePaolo gives to the program. She calls Honors Seminar the "crown jewel" of our liberal arts mission. Our expenses for the course were about $4,600, most of it for bringing outside speakers—although I will later describe a more economical variation of the seminar that I taught in earlier years.

The class enrolled 23 honors students ranging from freshman to seniors, but mostly in their freshman or sophomore years. We met in the late afternoons on Monday and Tuesday for two hours each day. The Monday classes usually involved a speaker, with about one hour for his or her presentation and up to an hour for questions and dialog. We assigned readings linked to each speaker's topic, ranging from scholarly articles to trial transcripts, court decisions, and even a bit of the Book of Genesis. On Tuesday we usually formed three breakout groups with seven or eight students and one professor, meeting in conference rooms to discuss the speaker and associated readings.

A key feature of the seminar is that the students were required to engage in four formal debates on creationism vs. evolution at the end of the term. They were advised of this at the outset and had all semester to research the subject, prepare their arguments, and prepare briefing books for rebutting whatever arguments the opposition might make. The class was evenly divided into four teams. At the end of the term, two of the teams debated in the Monday class and the other two teams on the following day. The week after that, the same teams debated each other again, but had to reverse positions—those who defended evolution the first week defended creationism the second, and vice versa.

This arrangement had two benefits. First, no students could reasonably accuse us of prejudice for forcing a fundamentalist Christian student to defend evolution, or forcing a religious skeptic to defend creationism—because in one debate or the other, everyone had to defend a position in which he or she did not personally believe, purely as an exercise in rhetoric. Prelaw students, especially, might well appreciate such an experience. The second benefit is that students learn a great deal more by having to see both sides of an issue, and having to research and express a persuasive argument for each side.

Agenda of Speakers and Topics

Our speakers and topics from week to week were as follows. In the first week, we got acquainted, laid out our expectations for the class, and gave them an initial free-writing exercise in which they began a journal, writing whatever expectations and preconceptions of this subject they had at the outset.

The second week, Dr. Amy Burt, Assistant Professor of Speech, addressed the class on the protocols and strategies of collegiate debating, so they would have some tips at the outset on how to prepare for the most effective presentations at the end of the semester. We also divided them into debate teams that week so the students could get acquainted with their teammates and begin to decide on their individual responsibilities.

We then focused on the history of the conflict. Dr. Bob Wilson, Professor of History, talked about the birth of Protestant Fundamentalism in America and how the anti-evolution campaign arose from this movement against theological modernism (Numbers, 1982). This set the stage for a study of the most famous trial on evolution, the Scopes Trial of 1925. Theater director Walter Bilderback discussed how the Scopes Trial has been presented in theater and cinema, how its presentation differs from one cultural context to another, and how the dramatic presentations of the trial compared to its reality. The following day, we showed the 1960 film, *Inherit the Wind,* with Spencer Tracy playing the role (Henry Drummond) modeled on Clarence Darrow, and Frederic March playing the role

(Matthew Brady) modeled on William Jennings Bryan (Kramer, 1960).

We sent the students home with an excerpt from the transcript of the actual Scopes Trial (Rhea County Historical Society, 1978)—specifically, the incident in which Darrow put Bryan on the witness stand. This scene is the climax of the movie, and the movie uses several lines of dialog taken directly from the trial, although with dramatic embellishments such as Brady collapsing and dying on the courtroom floor. But it was instructive for the students to study how the film deviated from the trial history, and for most, this was the only time they have ever read the transcript of a court trial, particularly one as famous as this.

On Saturday that week, we chartered a bus and took the class to Dayton, Tennessee, where the trial took place. We went first to William Jennings Bryan College, a sectarian institution with a creation-based science curriculum. Here we listened to presentations by Dr. Richard Cornelius, a retired English professor who is a Scopes Trial archivist, and Dr. Kurt Wise, a creationist biology professor who, ironically, earned his doctorate under the evolutionary theorist Stephen Jay Gould. Following their presentations, we visited the original trial courtroom, the Scopes museum in the courthouse basement, and several sites around town with a connection to the trial. Our last stop was dinner at the boarding house where John Scopes lived in 1925, now operated as a bed and breakfast inn.

The Scopes Trial affords an opportune segue from the history to the legal issues of creationism. The week after the Dayton trip, we assigned readings on the impact that the Scopes Trial had on textbooks and science classes in the decades that followed (Grabiner & Miller, 1974; Larson, 1977). Our speaker was Christopher Coates, an attorney in the U.S. Department of Justice, who discussed First Amendment law. He explained the criteria that the federal courts use in deciding cases of church-state separation. With this background, students were able to understand why creationism has failed all of its tests of constitutionality over the years. In connection with Mr. Coates's appearance, students read the Supreme Court decision in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968), overturning a statute left over from the 1920s that still banned the teaching of evolution. They also studied the U.S. District Court decision in *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* (1982), a challenge to a 1981 statute that required the teaching of "scientific creationism" in that state. In church-state law, there is a three-part test of constitutionality called the Lemon test (*Lemon v. Kurtzman,* 1971). In studying the Epperson and McLean cases, students were able to see how the Lemon test evolved over a 14-year history of First Amendment litigation and why creationism has been unable to meet its three tests of constitutionality. Students were also better equipped to understand the legal reasoning behind the many other church-state cases that arise in the news and federal courts, such as challenges to nativity scenes or the Ten Commandments on public property.

We then turned from law to philosophy and theology. Our next speaker was Dr. Michael Ruse, Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, well known for his many books on the history and philosophy of science and particularly on evolution and creationism Ruse, 1982, 1999). Ruse was an expert witness in *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education*. He delivered a witty and trenchant exposition of how Darwinism itself evolved from a science to a philosophy and even, arguably, to a secular religion, and how this has fueled the growth of the anti-evolutionary movement and helped create these court cases.

Dr. Viau spoke next, on parallel themes found in the creation myths of many cultures, including similarities between the biblical creation narratives and the creation stories of several other religions. Students watched one of the interviews in the public television series, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (Winstar, 1988), and studied

creation myths of a wide variety of world cultures (Leeming & Leeming, 1994).

A Jesuit theologian and geologist followed Dr. Viau from Boston College, Dr. James Skehan. Speaking as a man of both science and faith, Skehan spoke of his trust in the evidence of science where earth history is concerned, and in the inspiration of scripture where faith is concerned (Skehan, 1986). He strongly argued that the creationists are doing great harm to both science and faith. He argued that it is a profound mistake to think that the findings of science in any way diminish the spiritual message of the Bible. The students, by now wondering what kind of relationship to forge between their own faith and their knowledge of science, found Skehan's talk to be a great relief and an almost epiphanic insight. He served as an example of how one can personally harmonize the two—how an acceptance of evolution does not require a rejection of God.

When bad weather caused his flight home to Boston to be cancelled, Skehan spent an additional day with the class in the small Tuesday roundtable discussion. Here, students were able to talk with him on a more intimate level about their own questions of faith and science. A distinguished and genteel speaker, Father Skehan tied with Michael Ruse in votes for favorite speaker at the end of the term. He remarked that he was very impressed that here in the Bible Belt, students could discuss such an emotionally charged issue with such rationality and civility—certainly an indication that we were accomplishing one of the goals of our seminar.

Next was Dr. Michael Gass, a philosopher from Athens, Georgia, who spoke to the class on the nature of evidence in science and religion. He provided insights into how people from different perspectives, notably science and religion, can differ so greatly in how they deem a proposition to be true or false.

I had wanted to include a creationist in the speaker lineup, because I didn't want students to hear only from me that creationism was scientifically bankrupt. They could and should suspect bias if the only thing they were told about the arguments for creationism came from a biologist known to oppose creationist politics. I felt it would be more credible if we could arrange for them to hear the arguments directly from a believer, and judge for themselves. The person I had in mind was Dr. Duane Gish from the Institute for Creation Research, located near San Diego. I publicly debated Gish twice in the 1980s, so I invited him to come to Milledgeville. His secretary said he was unavailable, however, so I cast about for an alternative and found a willing speaker in Dr. Russell Carlson, a Professor of Biochemistry at the University of Georgia. He is an outspoken advocate of the "Intelligent Design" variety of creationism.

Inadvertently, we wound up with four creationists on the agenda, because when I confirmed my arrangements with Dr. Carlson, I had not anticipated the two lectures at William Jennings Bryan College; and then in addition, Dr. Gish and I spoke directly to each other and he accepted my invitation. I couldn't diplomatically cancel Dr. Carlson at that point, so I worked them both in. Dr. Carlson didn't want to debate, so I scheduled him for a regular lecture and Dr. Gish for a debate. Dr. Carlson gave the class a basic overview of intelligent design theory, mainly reviewing the ideas of William Dembski and Michael Behe, two well-known proponents of Intelligent Design (Behe, 1996; Dembski, 1999).

During spring break, the students finalized their preparations for their own debates, which were held during the first two weeks after their return. In the course evaluation, students said they were apprehensive about these debates at first. Few of them were science majors, and they did not look forward to having to speak intelligently, before an audience and against an opposing team, on topics such as fossils, genetics, radiometric dating, comparative

anatomy, the origin of the universe, and the laws of physics. But they rose admirably to the challenge. Through a team effort, they prepared voluminous briefing books and file boxes stuffed with index cards, summarizing key evolutionary and creationist arguments and their weaknesses. They amassed an impressive amount of information and taught themselves a great deal of science without hearing a single science lecture all semester. At the end of the course, they rated these debates as one of the two most enjoyable components of the course.

The component that tied with these was my debate with Gish, which was held the week after the final student debates. Gish's name had already appeared in a lot of the literature they had read, especially when they studied the post-Scopes creationist movement and the McLean trial, where Gish, along with Michael Ruse and Stephen Jay Gould, was called as a witness. His writings also came up frequently in the literature that the students researched for their debates. So they were anxious to meet him. I felt what better way could there be to expose students to creationist thought than by bringing its best-known spokesman?

He stayed as a guest at my home for two nights, and I gave a reception for him, as I did for the other out-of-state speakers. Students attended with special curiosity, wanting to see if he and I would explode, like matter and antimatter, when we shook hands. But notwithstanding our adversarial relationship on stage, Gish and I have long been on cordial terms. The subtext to having him as a house guest and giving this reception was to show students that people can disagree diametrically on an emotionally charged issue without going for each other's throats. You can debate the issue without attacking the person.

Gish is rather inflexible about his debate format, insisting on a four-hour show, so we debated in a campus auditorium from about 7:00 to 11:00 that Monday evening. We did not open the debate to the general public, because in my experience this results in area churches bringing people by the busload, more to demonstrate their hostility to evolution than to respectfully hear and weigh both sides of an argument. We did open it to the university community; anyone with a student, faculty, or staff ID could attend and bring one guest. About 200 people came to the debate and 140 remained for the entire 4 hours.

Although I allowed Dr. Gish to have his way as to the length and format of the debate, I did exercise the prerogative to do one thing that he and his sponsors normally disallow. That is to give the audience a form on which to write their comments and to vote for a winner—2 points for a decisive win and 1 point for a marginal win. Only 32 audience members turned in a form, but after the debate, Dr. Gish and I went to a nearby lounge and read these. He was noticeably disappointed. Only 4 people cast votes for creationism and 26 for evolution. On the 1- and 2-point system, creationism scored 7 points and evolution scored 45. Most interestingly, however, some people wrote that they were creationists, yet they felt that Dr. Gish had done a disappointing job of defending it and that they had to vote for the evolution argument in spite of themselves.

We then ended the course, the following week, with a plenary session in which the students discussed the debate and the course in general.

Outcomes

One measure of the outcome of this course is the students' own impressions and votes for their favorite aspects of the seminar. The student debates and Gish debate tied for first place, with the trip to Dayton coming in next. Of the speakers, their clear favorites were Michael Ruse and James Skehan—Ruse, I think, for not only the incisive intelligence of his talk but also for his earthy and humorous style of presentation; and Skehan for the gentleman

and scholar that he is, making students feel comfortable with both science and faith.

Of particular interest was their reaction to the four creationist speakers. At the beginning of the semester, nearly everyone in the class described themselves as conservative Christians. Only two professed to be on the agnostic end of the spectrum. There were no students of Muslim, Jewish, or other faiths in the class. But despite their conservative religion, and despite our efforts to be as even-handed as possible and give the creationists ample speaking opportunities, not one student found any of them to have made a convincing case.

Two of the most unshakably fundamentalist and creationist students, in fact, mildly insinuated that we had deliberately chosen poor speakers for the creationist cause, contending that we should have brought in some who could defend it better. But in fact, Dr. Gish is widely touted as the most effective and influential creationist speaker of the 20th century (Numbers, 1982); Dr. Wise at Bryan College is certainly one of the best-educated biologists among the creationists, having a Ph.D. from Harvard and from no less than Gould; and Dr. Carlson from UGA is a distinguished biochemist. So I certainly feel we brought in some of the very best representatives for the creationist cause that we could have. I optimistically speculate that the reason students found them unconvincing, even students who were predisposed to believe them, is that we did indeed effectively teach some effective critical thinking skills. That is certainly one of the most worthy things we could have achieved in such a course.

The following are some of the take-home lessons from this teaching experience:

1. *Teamwork.* The subject of creationism and evolution is so broad that no one could hope to research it very well, single-handedly, in one semester. To be prepared for whatever argument the opposing team might throw at them, and to have arguments in store that the other team might not anticipate, each debate team had to undertake a very thorough research effort to gather facts, organize their arguments, and effectively express their case. This required a division of labor in which the teams typically designated one member to be their expert on biology and paleontology, another to be their expert on historical and legal issues, and so forth. Success in debate required a well-coordinated team effort.
2. *Self-expression*. The debating experience, as well as our discussions in class, gave students valuable practice in speaking before an audience and building a convincing argument, even when defending something they did not personally believe. Each student was required not only to participate in the research effort but also to take a speaking part during the debates.
3. *Civility*. Students learned to debate a volatile issue with mutual respect and civility—not only in their formal debates at the end of the semester, but even more in ordinary, relatively unstructured classroom discussions where, sometimes, everyone wants to talk at once.
4. *Examining both sides*. Students learned the value of hearing out both sides of an issue and carefully considering the opposing arguments. Even if they are not persuaded, this can lead to a deeper understanding of their own position. Studying the opposition in such depth changes one's "gut feeling" that the opponent is wrong, to a well-informed opinion of exactly why he is wrong. Darwin himself was a model of anticipating the

objections to a point of view and amassing evidence that would head off the foreseeable criticisms.

5. *Getting wise to pseudoscience*. The creationist case sounds quite plausible to people who have had little background in science. Creationists can talk about thermodynamics, moon dust, Siberian mammoths, and radiometric dating in a way that sounds scientific unless one has the background to recognize where their science is either fabricated or misrepresented. To critically examine that case, our students had to study the literature on a vast range of topics from biology to astronomy. They had to examine the creationist arguments in depth, not just accept them at face value. They learned that just because something sounds scientific or plausible at first, it does not mean it is correct. This is a lesson that I hope made a deep impression on them and foster the habit of skepticism—something that will stay with them and make them more skeptical about a broad range of other pseudoscientific claims, whether it is UFOs, prehistoric astronauts, or medical quackery.
6. *Harmonizing science and religion*. Most students came to see that there is no necessary contradiction between science and religious faith. Contrary to what so many creationist authors and speakers say, they do not have to choose between God and evolution. Students left this course realizing that science and religion address two very different issues—the physical nature of the universe versus the spiritual purpose or needs of humanity. Most students seemed to leave the course thinking about evolution like Pope John Paul II: that religion teaches how to go to heaven; science teaches how the heavens go.

The Budget Version

There are ways of teaching such a seminar without needing a dozen guest speakers, a chartered bus, and a $5,000 budget. For many years from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, I taught this topic in a simpler fashion, single-handedly, as a senior seminar in the Biology Department, and on a shorter, 10-week schedule before the State University System of Georgia converted to the semester calendar.

Our senior seminar in biology is meant to ensure that every student receiving a B.S. in our department has had at least one course that involved both a research paper and an oral presentation. The subject matter and format vary greatly from one professor to another. When I was assigned the seminar early in my career, I felt that the creationism controversy could be a fruitful way of teaching literature research, writing, and speaking skills. At the same time, I felt, I could teach something about the interface between science and society, and focus on a subject in which most students would have a lively personal interest. I centered most of our weekly sessions around assigned readings much like the ones described for our honors seminar. Then as now, we covered American history, constitutional law, philosophy and theology, and finally the science and pseudoscience itself. We concluded that course with similar student debates. The only outside speaker I had was state representative Tommy Smith, who sponsored the "creation-science" bills in the Georgia legislature in the early 1980s, and who gladly came to Milledgeville to find an audience for his views. So it is possible to teach such a seminar on a smaller scale, have nearly as much fun, and achieve much the same learning outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I highly recommend this approach for all the aforesaid reasons. It is far more effective than a traditional didactic approach. It exposes students to a wide range of opinions. Their assigned readings, but even more importantly their debate preparation, leads them down the road of self-education. We did not teach them what they ended up knowing about evolution; we gave not a single lecture that laid out the theory or evidence of evolution. They learned that on their own, through the research that they deemed necessary to avoid embarrassment and defeat in debate. We on the faculty called ourselves *facilitators,* and indeed that is what we did—we did not dispense information, but facilitated and guided their learning. I think we succeeded in producing students who were scientifically and historically better informed, and spiritually more self-aware.[4]

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Footnotes

[1] The approved statement reads: "It is the educational philosophy of the Cobb County School District to provide a broad based curriculum; therefore, the Cobb County School District believes that discussion of disputed views of academic subjects is a necessary element of providing a balanced education, including the study of the origin of the species. This subject remains an area of intense interest, research and discussion among scholars. As a result, the study of this subject shall be handled in accordance with this policy and with objectivity and good judgment on the part of teachers, taking into account the age and maturity level of their students.

"The purpose of this policy is to foster critical thinking among students, to allow academic freedom consistent with legal requirements, to promote tolerance and acceptance of diversity of opinion, and to ensure a posture of neutrality toward religion. It is the intent of the Cobb County Board of Education that this policy not be

interpreted to restrict the teaching of evolution; to promote or require the teaching of creationism; or to discriminate for or against a particular set of religious beliefs; religion in general, or non-religion."

[2] Bruce Alberts, 18 September 2002, A Request to Help Counter the Cobb County, Ga., School Board's Actions on the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools. Letter to Georgia members of the National Academic of Sciences, <www4.nationalacademies.org/nas/nashome.nsf/urllinks/NAS-5E4MM4?OpenDocument>.

[3] AAAS Board Resolution on Intelligent Design Theory, passed 18 October 2002, released at www.aaas.org/news/releases/2002/1106id2.shtml

[4]A copy of the syllabus for this course and a partial transcript of my debate with Dr. Gish can be obtained by request to ksaladin@gcsu.edu