

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

200 Years Later, Darwin's Theories Still Inspire Science, Economics and Politics,
2/13/2009

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/science/jan-june09/darwin_02-13.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

Student Worksheet (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. Who is Charles Darwin? What is he famous for?

2. Explain the theory of evolution.

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – **Student Worksheet**

1. What is "On the Origin of Species"?

ANSWER

Darwin's 1859 masterpiece, "On the Origin of Species," provided an explanation for the similarities between all of earth's organisms, arguing that all living things come from a shared ancestor.

2. Why was "On the Origin of Species" considered radical?

ANSWER

At the time of its publication, Darwin's book was considered radical because his theories contradicted the biblical belief that God created man in six days. Some still think it is radical.

3. What is natural selection?

ANSWER

Natural selection is the process that ensures organisms with certain physical traits that protect them in their environment will survive and produce more offspring. Organisms that lack the appropriate traits will ultimately die off.

4. What is the “tree of life”? Why is it important?

ANSWER

Darwin imagined that organisms were linked together in a great “tree of life,” in which the characteristics of younger species share a common heritage with an older species.

This understanding is still relevant to modern scientists who use the metaphor of the evolutionary tree to track the spread of disease, and map out the history of the human race by looking at DNA patterns.

5. What is “intelligent design”?

ANSWER

It is the theory that only a higher power or God could have created such an incredibly complex system of biological life.

6. What is the significance of the fight between evolution and intelligent design?

ANSWER

Many who don't believe in evolution argue that it should not be taught as scientific fact in public schools. They say that creationism or intelligent design should be presented as factual alternatives to evolution.

Several court cases over the past decade have brought the subject of evolution to the national political stage. In March of 2009, for example, the Texas Board of Education will vote on how evolution should be taught to Texan students.

7. According to Gallup, what percentage of Americans believe in evolution?

ANSWER

A recent Gallup poll showed that while 39 percent of the nation believes in evolution, about 25 percent does not, and 36 percent do not have any opinion at all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. Do you think it's right to apply Darwin's natural selection theory to anything besides biology? (Economics, history, etc)

2. How does Darwin's “survival of the fittest” theory resonate in American society and culture?

3. Some economists say that the up side of the current economic recession is that only the strong (the “fittest”) businesses, banks and institutions will survive. What do you think?

4. Do you think that evolution should be taught in schools? Why or why not? Should intelligent design? Creationism?

5. Who decides what is taught in school? How are those decisions made? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.