

‘Human Evolution For Beginners’

Instructor: Bernard Wood, Henry R. Luce and GW University Professor of Human Origins

Description: We, modern humans, are just a small twig on the Tree of Life (TOL). For example, we share ca. 98% of our DNA with the chimpanzees and 40% of it with plants. Yet we are different to the extent that our existence depends on our ability to generate, communicate and respond to complex ideas. Modern humans are not unique in having technology, but ours is orders of magnitude more complex than that seen in any other animal. It is estimated that the last common ancestor we shared another living animal was with the chimpanzees and that this was likely to have been ca. 8-4 million years (Myr) ago. Thus, although we can reconstruct some of our recent evolutionary history using DNA for most of this 8-4 Myr any attempt to reconstruct human evolutionary history is dependent on the recovery and interpretation of fossils.

You will be introduced to the human fossil record in a novel way. You will be given a real fossil discovery to interpret (see below). In doing so you will be introduced to the sciences that underpin the study of human evolution. One course will not equip you make the next important discovery about human evolution, but this course will enable you to understand the context of such discoveries and also show how an intelligent understanding of human evolutionary history can make you a more thoughtful citizen.

This class is exactly as stated in the title. It is for people who have a curiosity about, and an interest in, the origins of humankind. There are no prerequisites except intelligence, curiosity, and a willingness to be challenged. Students will be encouraged to take particular advantage of this Department’s close links with the Human Origins Program at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum for Natural History and all the other relevant resources here in DC.

Format: The Class will be in the format of a Problem-Based Learning Seminar. There are no course books and no exams, but if past experience is any thing to go by, this may be one of the most demanding courses you will take at GW. There will be an initial meeting to explain the process. The “problem” will be based on an actual fossil discovery, or on research related to improving our understanding of human evolutionary history. In the final session the group will meet to assess the overall effectiveness of the process and work out how to generate the peer component of the assessment (see below).

Assessment: The class grade will be based on a combination of peer and Faculty assessment of each student’s contribution to the PBL process (ca. 75%), and the balance of the assessment will be based on peer and Faculty assessment of the article prepared in response to the brief/problem tackled in the Class. The article should aim to communicate to the general public the context and potential importance of the topic of the brief, and students are encouraged to illustrate the article with diagrams and relevant images (properly acknowledged if they are not original).

For information about the instructor please see the website accessible from his email address ‘bernardawood@gmail.com’