"ID Judo -- using ID to help teach science"

By John Gear

Although this will shock many who know me, I've decided that the "Intelligent Design," or ID, crowd is absolutely right: We should teach ID in schools – and in science class no less.

That's because there is simply no better subject for teaching the difference between science – figuring out the laws that determine how nature really works – and non-science, using supernatural forces to describe how nature appears to work. And this "debate" is long overdue, because many, many Americans are have no firm grasp of the difference, mainly because of the horrible way science is "taught" in this country.

Below the college level, most "science" classes are anything but. Instead, most schools force teachers to use the "Big Wad O' Facts" science-teaching method, or BWOF for short. Here's how BWOF works.

Find some teachers. Hire science majors if you can, but no worries if you can't. (If anything, science majors make life harder. They often fail to focus on the Most Important Thing, standardized test scores.) Generally, anyone who can get teaching credentials will do.

Except in the rarest of schools, nearly all the "science teachers" have never once done any science outside of a graded school assignment. That is, unless cornered and made to use "science" and given a gold star for a neatly typed report, they don't practice it. It's like hiring vegetarians to teach kids how to barbeque spareribs.

Next, insist on using textbooks. Textbooks provide the main BWOF ingredient: a cornucopia of desiccated "facts," neatly arranged in discrete chapters to tell students that "physics," "chemistry," "biology," and "geology" (excuse me, I mean "earth science") and "astronomy" are all completely different, unconnected subjects. Textbooks are great for turning relentlessly questioning five-year olds, filled with wonder and curiosity, into slack-jawed, glassy-eyed teens filled with a burning desire to know: "Is this going to be on the test?"

The final ingredient: endlessly demand "high standards," political doublespeak for "high standardized test scores." Mix well and ignore, in between panicked bouts of furious stirring when the pundits – non-scientists all – gas on about the need for yet "higher standards" because "The Russians are Coming! No, wait! It's the Japanese! No, it's the Finns! No, the Chinese!" and presto! The BWOF soufflé – a nation of believers in astrology, alien visits, homeopathy, the theories of Depok Chopra, the Laffer Curve, and – by a solid majority – creationism.

In a nutshell, we suck at teaching science. Contrary to what profit-seeking text and test publishers say, science is not about facts at all. BWOF and standardized tests turn an endlessly fascinating subject into years of pointless regurgitation that instills only apathy. Thus, we churn out well-tested scientific ignoramuses who can fill in the bubbles on multiple-guess tests without knowing the first thing about framing a usable hypothesis (one that is falsifiable), observer bias, scientific ethics, or anything else about real science.

That's why we need ID: to introduce doubt into science classes, thus showing how science is not about the right answer but, rather, about finding reliable methods that yield the best answer so far.

So, not only should we teach ID, we should do so every year, in every science class. Besides, it takes just two sentences to teach both the entire theory of ID and present its entire body of evidence. Ready? One: we live in a world filled with wondrously complicated beings. Two: It's possible that an intelligent designer put it all here; at least, science can't rule it out.

That done, we can spend the rest of the year experimenting and, in the course of it, talking about WHY science can't rule ID out, what science actually is, and how it works, when it goes astray, and how it finds its way back. Naturally, we will have to consider the "alternative" to ID every year too: evolution by natural selection, one of the three or four most profound, powerful, and fruitful scientific ideas ever developed.

Even better, science teachers would have to review all this annually, helping them remember the difference between untestable guesses and science, which is, as Nobel prizewinner Richard Feynmann famously put it, just "learning how not to fool ourselves."

Naturally, ID backers will object – as many already do – that we make a "religion" of science by insisting on its fundamental premise: that there are no supernatural causes in science (no intelligent designers, in other words). But this is nonsense, like saying that football is a religion because it makes players follow its rules rather than those of hockey.

In the end, real science loses nothing standing next to ID. And, although they don't realize it, ID boosters can only lose by forcing their pet non-theory into science classes. When they can't complain about close-minded scientists refusing to teach ID, they lose the only thing that makes them interesting or sympathetic. Meanwhile, they will also start losing all those kids who can't tell ID apart from science because they've only had BWOF science classes. Put ID into schools and you end up with kids getting some real science too, with ID being the perfect foil for helping teachers show the difference between science and non-science.

Thus, it's time to embrace ID. It's probably our best chance for replacing the thin gruel of BWOF and standardized tests with something all too often absent from schools: science.