

ANTH 710.10 Human Evolution for Beginners

Instructor: Bernard Wood, Henry Luce Professor in Human Origins

CRN: 86424 Behavioral and Social Sciences GCR

In Amsterdam House 202, TR 5:10-6:30 pm

Open to all students

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 for the class, except intelligence, curiosity, and a willingness to be challenged. We, modern humans, are just a small twig on the Tree of Life (TOL) (for example, we share c. 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, and on a technology that 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 c. 10-5 million years (myr) ago. Thus, although we can reconstruct some of our recent evolutionary history using DNA, for most of this 10-5 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.

Format: The Class will be in the format of a Problem-Based Learning Seminar. There will be an initial meeting of the whole class to explain the process. Then the Class will divide into two seminar groups, one led by me and another led by a colleague who has experience of PBL instruction. Both groups will tackle the same problem. The 'problem' will be based on an actual fossil discovery. That first problem will take us to the middle of the semester. The groups will then combine to compare notes and assess progress. In the second half of the semester the same groups will tackle a second problem, but the instructors will rotate. In the final session the two groups will meet together, assess the overall effectiveness of the process and generate the smaller component of the assessment (see below). Students should 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 the unrivalled resources of the Library of Congress.

Assessment: The class grade will be based on a combination of peer and Faculty assessment of each student's contribution to the PBL process (c.25%), and the balance of the assessment will be based on peer and Faculty assessment of a c.1500-2000 word article, prepared electronically, based on one of the two 'problems' tackled in the Class. The style of should be that of an article in the 'Science Times' section of the NYT, or of an article in 'Time' magazine. The article should aim to communicate to the general public the context and potential importance of the discovery. Students are encouraged to illustrate the article with diagrams and relevant images.

Bernard Wood is the Henry R. Luce Professor of Human Origins in the Department of Anthropology and Adjunct Senior Scientist at the National Museum of Natural History, the

Smithsonian Institution. He is a medically-qualified paleoanthropologist who moved into full-time academic life in 1972. His research centers on increasing our understanding of human evolutionary history by developing and improving the ways we analyze the hominid fossil record. Dr. Wood is the Director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Human Paleobiology at GW.