

Teaching and Learning: The Oxford Experience

By Cheryl A. Lindeman



It all started with an invitation from the Oxford Round Table. I was summoned to participate in a lively debate at Exeter College in the Oxford University about, "Science and Faith: The Great Matter." If you have participated in an Oxford University summer experience, I am sure you will agree it is a once in a lifetime learning endeavor. The Oxford Round Table gatherings are coordinated by Harris Manchester College: "The purpose of the Oxford Round Table is to promote human advancement and understanding through the improvement of education."

<http://www.oxfordroundtable.co.uk/new.htm>

The objective of this column is to share a teaching and learning experience through my Oxford Round Table participation.

Preparing for the Oxford Round Table involved the normal travel arrangements. The next step was trying to figure out what was expected of me. All participants were invited to write a paper to present during one of the five days of the Round Table. No guidelines were given – just submit your paper. I spent two months trying to decide what to write about. My title was easy: "Is Darwin in your classroom?" Knowing that most of the invited participants were college professors who are scholars in their fields of science and religion, I was very uncertain about my paper. Without a reading list, I spent several hours in a used book store looking for scholarly books on the topics. Authors such as Dawkins, Behe, Wilson, Dobzhansky, Watson and of course Charles Darwin were on my top ten list.

"Where to begin?" I chuckled to myself. "Read" was the response that came back to me. So, I set out my course to decide the order of my reading list. Start with Darwin and then expand to others. It seemed like a plan.

In early May I started to get emails from one of the participants explaining how he was the designated person to collect the electronic papers and distribute them to the group. Within one week I had ten papers to review. It was clear that I made the right decision not to submit a paper. The ten papers were from experts in their fields – geology, philosophy, religion, biology, anthropology. Themes emerged — biological evolution, the case against creationism, the place of intelligent design discussions in classrooms, what undergraduates think about Darwin. More papers were distributed, and now I had twenty-five papers to review and make comments on by mid-July.

It was exciting to meet all the participants during our opening reception at Exeter College. We were indoctrinated to the Oxford traditions and lovely table settings.

David Browning, our facilitator, is the Head of Islamic Studies Center at the University of Oxford. He welcomed us and challenged us to be in the spirit of the Oxford learning community – to listen, to question, to ponder and to have dialogue with each other.

He admitted that the British don't seem to have an issue with the Evolution, Creationism & Intelligent Design controversies. They don't have major lawsuits or, "all that fuss," as there are in the, "States." He was anxious to hear what each participant had to say.

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The setting for our presentations and debates was the famous Oxford Union Old Library.

The Oxford Union is known for its world famous debates with some controversial persons (<http://www.oxford-union.org/>); Malcom X, Mother Theresa, Richard Nixon, and The Queen herself are in debate pictures lining the halls of the Union building. We were fortunate to have our discussions in the Old Library, which is a historical landmark. The Old Library has pre-Raphaelite murals depicting the Knights of the Round Table legends painted by young artists between 1857-1859. It was very easy to get lost in the murals during some of the paper presentations!

The outcomes of the Oxford Round Table included hearing a variety of interpretations about where and when the discussion of Evolution, Creationism and Intelligent Design should be taught. The consensus of the group was, without a doubt, that biological evolution belonged in all science courses where the discussion about organisms, biochemical processes and DNA are outlined. The age level includes middle school through college. Debating the three topics belongs in philosophy, religion or upper level courses in evolution. College students have the ability to listen to a variety of view points and learn to analyze the various positions. In Oxford, it is very likely that a student will study the three topics and meet with a tutor over the course of a semester. The final result in the Oxford model is a long paper with a huge reading list.

Back in the United States, I decided to research more about the historical letters and writings by Darwin. I was amazed to find his complete works online along with his letters. They can be found at: www.darwin-online.org.uk and <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Departments/Darwin/index.html>. From this information I have developed a unit on evolution that will be an online learning activity using BlackBoard technology. When my students found out I went to Oxford last summer, they were all eyes and ears. They seemed to like the idea of, "no class," and all papers. I am sure

they would have a different impression after spending a year at Oxford.

After the incredible learning experience, I was able to hear a lecture by Richard Dawkins at one of our local colleges. As an Oxford Professor, he gave a traditional reading of his new book, The God Delusion, and it was clear that my Oxford experience helped me to sit back and ponder what he was saying. It was a scholarly event to add to my wonderful memories of Oxford. If you receive an invitation to attend the Oxford Round Table, by all means accept it! Having the opportunity to leisurely study, reflect, debate and dialogue with educators from all around the globe is a "top 10" experience of a lifetime.

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