

ANTH 3640 Race and Human Evolution
Assignment #3 Summary Notes

Here are some key points about storytelling and human evolution raised in your essays and by the authors of your readings that are worth emphasizing. If you read closely you will see yourself in these notes!

I. Advantages and Disadvantages of Storytelling

A. Advantages

1. Familiar
2. Accessible
3. Persuasive
4. Entertaining
5. Well-loved

B. Dangers/Risks

1. Human Evolution is not a popular idea. It often requires “trigger” warnings! The Gallup Poll graph (below) helps explain why many museums won’t touch the topic (Waters). A large percentage of Americans believe that humans were created by God, and not naturally evolved.
2. Narrative structure inevitably simplifies complex issues and/or creates misunderstandings. It runs the risk of mythmaking, not educating. From Lewin:
 - a. Humans evolve!
 - b. Apes don’t!
3. Language (and images) can allow all sorts of cultural biases (Gould) to prosper:
 - a. Racism.
 - b. Sexism.
 - c. Nationalism.
 - d. Anthropocentrism (humans as the center of the universe).
 - e. Progressivism (all change is for the better).

II. Ways to Capitalize on the Advantages and Minimize the Dangers of Storytelling:

- A. Recognize the power or “positionality” of cultural institutions as “major social forces.”
- B. Be aware of the biases and attitudes that language and images (St. Felix) can create.
- C. Include, in stories and exhibits, accounts of past mistakes and misinterpretations. These humanize the science!
- D. Work with the latest data. Scientific reality can provide storylines that are sometimes more interesting than science fiction (e.g., evolutionary side branching; species introgression; Human “Hobbit” downsizing).
- E. Present conflicting interpretations, rather than just one...even at the risk of confusing the audience.
- F. Experiment with alternative narrative structures: instead of “Hero Folk Tales” (Lewin) that emphasize Individual Achievement (the Protestant Work Ethic!), why not emphasize “Average Joes and Janes Just Finding a Way”?
- G. Use exhibit space differently. Most pathways through museum exhibits are linear, progressive, and orthogenetic. Why not experiment with a pathway that branches and/or takes visitors into dead ends (extinction)? Or, with presentations that reflect the fact that evolution works in a “halting, unpredictable fashion” (Lewin)? Allow physical space to reinforce the messages of the story.

III. Other Takeaways from the Week’s Material that are Good to Keep in Mind Going Forward:

A. From the Piltdown Video: Evolution as a “Braided Stream”: a metaphor that’s different from the orthogenetic straight line or “ladder” metaphor and the currently favored “branching tree” metaphor. It’s an image that incorporates the idea of interbreeding or introgression between species much more explicitly than the others.



B. Also from the Piltdown Video: The idea that introgression “aided human adaptation to a range of environments.”

C. From Gould’s Essay: A “Money Quote” regarding whether the influence “hope”, “bias”, or “emotional attachment” (Waters) threaten the legitimacy (Lewin) of paleoanthropology as a field of scientific study:

“I am not distressed that the human order must veil all our interactions with the universe, for the veil is translucent, however strong its texture.” (page 120).

→ In other words, we can establish facts about how the universe works!

