Intelligent design debate makes for lively course, profs say

By Dave Brendsel

Mixing religion and science these days is a recipe for controversy.

Yet when two DU professors spread out a banquet of scientific and theological theories behind evolution and intelligent design for more than 60 undergraduates, the result is food for thought.

Anthropology Associate Professor Dean Saitta and religious studies Associate Professor Greg Robbins have been co-teaching Science and Religion in Dialogue, an undergraduate core curriculum course, at DU for four years. But this year, with the debate over intelligent design being played out in courtrooms, classrooms and the media, the educational odd couple—one a scientist and “God-fearing atheist” and the other a church member and religion expert—decided to include the evolution debate in their curriculum.

“If the course does anything,” Saitta says, “it teaches students that this is more than a sound-byte discussion.”

The current controversy, the professors say, adds spice to the subject matter and classroom discussions.

“It’s the liveliest large class on campus,” Robbins says.

During the first few weeks, the course immersed students in Darwin by drawing on the expertise of Saitta and Robbins, who have read his original texts, studied his contemporaries, visited his home and gravesite, and retraced his footsteps in the Galapagos Islands. They tried to provide students with context by describing the tortured debate that occurred when religious thinkers of Darwin’s time tried to reconcile their faith with the emerging scientific theory of evolution. And, the professors say, they tried to quell the current Darwin bashing by revealing the humane side of the scientist—the Charles Darwin who loved music and was committed to friends and family.

Students then followed the evolution debate to America. They studied the 1925 Scopes “monkey” trial—which tested a state ban on the teaching of evolution—and watched Inherit the Wind, the 1960 movie about the trial. Students examined the rise of American Christian fundamentalism and the emerging concept of intelligent design, in which proponents argue that holes in the theory of evolution open the way for an alternative explanation of life’s beginnings. Students also reviewed Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District, a 2005 federal court case in which the judge ruled that intelligent design had no place in a science class. And finally, students read Finding Darwin’s God, Kenneth Miller’s search for common ground between God and evolution.

“The class was a good exploration of science and religion,” says Daniel Easton, a junior religious studies and philosophy major. “It took the debate out of the theoretical.”

Easton says Saitta and Robbins tried hard to balance class discourse. After taking the class, Easton says he doesn’t see a conflict between religion and science, but believes that both are threatened by portraying intelligent design as science.

Betsy Hansen says intelligent design explains evolutionary concepts Darwin’s theory doesn’t address. The junior accounting major has been exposed to different religious concepts by her parents and continues to study different belief systems revolving around God, she says. Saitta and Robbins, she says, injected enough history and religious thought into the course to represent various points of view.

“It was pretty well balanced,” Hansen says.