

Intelligent design has distinctly evolutionary nature

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The intelligent design movement is evolving, and it is happening in much the same way as natural selection shapes biological species.

Intelligent design, or ID, is being shaped by opportunities its proponents encounter as they try to promote ID as a science in the public mind and in public schools. Flip through the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture's document titled the "Wedge Strategy," and you will find a plan "to replace [materialistic science] with a science consonant with Christian theistic convictions." ID proponents call themselves "the Wedge" and they developed this strategy 12 years ago; their efforts since provide ample opportunity to observe the evolution of their movement.

Like any evolving system, ID has highly conserved traits. In this case, these qualities reflect the movement's creationist ancestry. The most prominent trait is its scientific sterility: For example, Discovery Institute fellow William Dembski, ID's chief intellectual, rejects human evolution by arguing [that] paleontologists' efforts to establish common ancestry with earlier hominids is "based on the assumption that humans evolved in the first place." Such throwback attributes, like this blindness to relevant science, are stable. Others, however, are evolving relatively quickly.

Rather than evolving in Darwinian fashion — in which useful traits enhance survival — ID evolves in a Lamarckian sense. ID behaves in response to its needs and surroundings, reflecting the search for a successful strategy after many failures. ID's evolution is most clearly seen in proponents' language when they present the movement to educational policymakers. Because of opposition to ID-friendly changes in state science standards and curricula, ID's promotional terminology has become one of the movement's most rapidly evolving traits. In fact, ID proponents now view the term "intelligent design" as a liability. Attempting to influence educational policy, they disavow and avoid the term "ID" when speaking to state and local boards of education, using euphemisms ID supporters believe will camouflage their creationism. This is supposed to provide legal cover for ID's entry into science classrooms, but the linguistic changes are easy to trace.

ID's early terminology reflected its true identity. In 1992, Dembski called the intelligent designer "a supernatural intelligence." In 1996, when the Discovery Institute was building its religious, political and financial base, its web site announced that new scientific developments were "re-opening the case for the supernatural." Making no distinction between ID and creationism, Discovery Institute fellow Jonathan Wells openly discussed ID as creationism, asserting, "The most vocal advocates of design in the creation-evolution controversies, however, are creationists rather than theistic evolutionists." He cited "creationists such as law professor Phillip Johnson," founder of "the Wedge."

In 1998, Dembski predicted that in five years, intelligent design would be "sufficiently developed to deserve funding from the National Science Foundation." The five years have passed. There is no NSF money because there is no ID science. And although "the Wedge" garnered much publicity when it entered the 2000 Kansas debate over state science standards, its resulting high public profile blew ID's cover.

Two years later, in 2002, ID proponents explicitly promoted intelligent design during the Ohio Board of Education's debate over new science standards. This was an exemplary case. John Calvert of the Intelligent Design Network, an organization of ID supporters in Kansas, joined Robert Lattimer, a member of the group in charge of writing the Ohio standards, in arguing [that] "intelligent design, the principal scientific alternative to Darwinism, should also be included in the curriculum." Pro-ID board member Michael Cochran proposed the inclusion of "intelligent design theory" in the standards, while fellow pro-ID board member Deborah Owens-Fink asserted, "Design theory is a scientific concept."

Facing opposition from the group Ohio Citizens for Science, the board compromised by inserting a provision requiring students to learn how scientists “critically analyze aspects of evolutionary theory,” followed by a disclaimer: “The intent of this benchmark does not mandate the teaching or testing of intelligent design.” But the board allowed known ID-supporter Bryan Leonard to write the lesson plan. In late 2003, the Department of Education publicly released a draft of this plan, but only after it was leaked and the Ohio Academy of Science had to file a formal public records request to obtain it.

ID proponents viewed the benchmark as an opening for criticisms of evolution. Since referring to intelligent design in the lesson would have revealed ID’s true intent, ID was built into the lesson covertly. The plan states that students must search for “supporting and challenging” data regarding aspects of evolution — aspects taken from Jonathan Wells’ book *Icons of Evolution*, which the first draft of the Ohio lesson plan referenced along with official ID Web sites. Even though direct references to this book and the web sites were removed in the revised draft, students are still required to find “challenging data,” a task that will still force them to the Internet because legitimate science textbooks do not contain such data. Predictably, searches for “critical analysis of evolution” on the Internet search engine Google lead students to a cornucopia of creationism.

While opponents of the lesson plan considered litigation after the Ohio board approved the revised plan in March 2004, ID-supporters continued to insist that the lesson plan did not promote ID: Lattimer declared it “totally science;” Owens-Fink denied any ID content, [and] so did the Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture’s Associate Director John West, contending that the lesson plan’s purpose is “to teach students more about evolution, including criticisms made in peer-reviewed science journals over major parts of evolutionary theory.” But “the Wedge” and its supporters were tellingly pleased by the board’s decision. Discovery Institute president Bruce Chapman declared it a “victory for students and their academic freedom.”

The linguistic signals from Ohio were detected in Darby, Mont., where another ID outbreak had begun. Minister Curtis Brickley was on the Darby school board’s March 10, 2003, agenda, requesting that ID be added to Darby’s science curriculum. On Dec. 10, 2003, he gave an undisguised public presentation about ID to win support. But Brickley’s terminology, too, soon began to evolve. In a Dec. 30 *Montana Forum* op-ed, defending ID with recognizable Discovery Institute talking points, he asked that students learn “the scientific weaknesses of Darwin’s theory, as well as its strengths.”

In [an] early Jan. 2004 op-ed, he proposed to the board an “objective origins” policy permitting ID to be taught alongside evolution. Although the term “objective origins” is a known creationist euphemism for intelligent design, Brickley’s policy conspicuously avoided the latter term, proposing instead that teachers be encouraged to help students “analyze the scientific strengths and weaknesses of existing scientific theories, including the theory of evolution.” His op-ed had invoked Ohio’s “critical analysis” benchmark by saying it required students to learn “scientific criticisms of Darwin’s theory,” not ID. He shifted his public statements from “intelligent design” to “objective origins.”

By late January, facing opposition from Ravalli County Citizens for Science, Darby’s ID-opposition group, Brickley regretted his December pro-ID presentation and tried to disconnect his objective origins policy from it. “If I could go back and do it all over again, I wouldn’t have put those things together. I think it’s sort of confused the issue. I don’t think that ‘objective origins’ and ‘intelligent design’ are one in the same. I just want us to look at evolution critically, at the evidence for it and the evidence against it,” he said.

Indeed, Brickley denied both ID and the Discovery Institute’s involvement. He said, “I am not a speaker for intelligent design, and I am not a speaker for the Discovery Institute.” But he was assisted by the Discovery Institute’s legal advisor David DeWolf, who at the next [school board] meeting urged board members not to fear litigation. Although DeWolf disavowed his intent to defend teaching ID, he made a point of trying to disassociate ID from creationism.

Following this public glimpse of “the Wedge” in action in Darby, the Alliance Defense Fund jumped in. The fund is a legal organization who “provides the resources that will keep the door open for the spread of the Gospel through the legal defense and advocacy of religious freedom, the sanctity of human life, and

traditional family values,” says the fund’s web site. In an interview, the fund’s attorney, Bridgette Erickson, defended the objective origins policy’s wording: “With regard to what some might see as loose language, I think the encouragement part lends some defensibility to the policy.”

Brickley’s plan was working. In the end, three of Darby’s five board members supported his proposed policy to get ID taught in schools. But the townspeople split over it, and a partially reconstituted board was poised to reject it after voters defeated two pro-ID candidates in the May 2004 election. In a May 18 op-ed in the *Ravalli Republic*, Brickley attributed the defeat to “propaganda and misinformation.” Defending his policy, he never mentioned the term “intelligent design.” But opponents on the board were not fooled; they killed the proposal in July.

The Discovery Institute has now resorted to denying the term “intelligent design” in its own public statements. Responding to National Public Radio reports about Ohio and Darby that accurately portrayed both cases as being about ID, Discovery Institute spokesman Rob Crowther wrote, “The Darby policy does NOT mention intelligent design.” In a letter to an NPR editor, the Discovery Institute’s John West protested that the NPR story for which he was interviewed about Ohio omitted remarks in which “I repeatedly denied the claim that the lesson plan was about intelligent design.”

So, having evolved away from “the Wedge” strategy’s argument for “the integration of design theory into public school science curricula,” the ID movement is in an odd predicament, a victim of its own PR campaign. Having developed the strategy to promote ID, they must now defend it with something other than the term “intelligent design.” . . .