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Are you related to a cabbage?: A pragmatic approach to teaching evolution in the classroom and dealing with fundamentalist religious beliefs

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Pragmatics is a philosophy which suggests that if an approach works in practice then it is valid. The vast majority of Earth Scientists and Biologists agree that the Theory of Evolution is the only explanation for the diversity of life on Earth and advocate that it is an essential part of the school curriculum. However, in general they do not encourage discussions around alternative beliefs to evolution which often stem from the fundamentalist religious beliefs of the school pupils and even the teachers themselves. This is especially the case in the United States where the first amendment forbids the teaching of religion in government schools. At best, they may concede that there is a need to manage any conflict that may arise between science and religion but few practical methods for managing this conflict are suggested. This paper outlines a pragmatic approach to resolving the conflict between evolution and fundamentalist religion. It is based upon numerous workshops and talks that have been presented to South African schools, teachers and members of the public over six years. These workshops and presentations explore different attitudes towards evolution and religion, present the evidence for evolution in a humorous way and conclude that we should treat cabbages with more respect, as they are our distant relatives. The talk also examines the link between evolutionary theory, the rest of the geosciences and explores the broad concept of how these are communicated with in African (and other) Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

