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BHP Unit 6 Overview | OER Project

In this unit, we finally get to humans! Well, to be fair, we met a lot of humans in the first five units as we learned about how our understanding of the Universe evolved. But this unit is all about humans and how we evolved into us! You'll learn about how early humans lived and shared information with each other, including cultural practices like belief systems, innovations such as tool making, and how they made and used the things they needed.

0:12

Host holding an index card up with animation of buildings behind her.

I'm a people person. And I noticed that after five whole units about the Universe and the planet, we haven't seen any people yet! It's like one of those apocalypse movies where everyone's gone. But that's only because they haven't gotten here yet. So this unit is an apocalypse in reverse. It's an... espylacopa. Remember that word. It's gonna be on a test.

Oh hi, Bob. It's my producer, Bob. Uh-huh? Mhm. Okay. Uh, espylacopa will not be on the test.

Hi, I'm Rachel Hansen, and this is Unit 6: Early Humans.

1:06

Images of scientists.

Of course, it wouldn't really be accurate to say people weren't part of the first five units. How else could we have explored what we know and how we know it? We need people-like archeologists and astrophysicists—discovering what things were like before... well, people.

Animation of the night sky.

And just like in the first five units, we're going to need a lot of different disciplines if we're going to contextualize our place in this vast Universe and understand how we know what we know about the most complex of topics: us!

Images of cave paintings.

For example, check out these rocks. These incredibly lifelike, detailed paintings were made by humans who lived in this cave over 30,000 years ago. This one is in France, but there are similar examples all over the world.

2:00

These stunning images raise two very important questions:

First, how did early humans learn to create this art? Our chimpanzee and bonobos cousins never learned to paint.

And second, how do we know when they were created?

The answer to both these questions is collective learning.

That's one of the reasons it's so important to study these early humans in a history class.

Images of clay tablets with writing.

When most people say "history", they mean "human history." And when they think "human history", they think "the written history of human societies". But humans only developed writing five or six thousand years ago. Our collective learning started much earlier.

Course timeline graphic.

Let's find writing on our BHP timeline. Here's when writing was invented. But way back here, that's when our early hominid ancestors evolved. If we started our narrative of human history with the invention of writing, we'd miss out on a million years of human history, and 250,000 years of Homo sapiens history!

3:13

Images of cave paintings.

And on top of that, you just saw some clear evidence from a French cave that humans have been leaving behind records of their lives for many thousands of years prior to the invention of writing.

Images of scientists and technology.

And with disciplines like archaeology and technologies like carbon dating, we can dig back even further in time to understand the stories our ancestors left behind.

Unit 5 graphic.

Text of characteristics of life with definitions.

4:02

Clip of deep ocean vents.

Animation of dinosaurs.

Images of study of evolution.

Unit 6 graphic and text definition of collective learning.

5:10

Animation of genetic sequences.

Images of cave paintings.

Clips of archaeologists.

Image of Jane Goodall.

Text defining interdisciplinary.

6:02

Unit 6 graphic.

Images of early human tools.

Okay so, quick recap. In Unit 5 we added life to the Big History narrative.

Remember that we defined life as having five characteristics: Reproduction, Homeostasis, Adaptation, Metabolism, and DNA/RNA.

Then we examined the origins of life on Earth—which probably occurred around deep ocean vents where the lava mixed with complex chemicals and water to create the first single-celled organisms.

Next, we moved on to how life evolved into more complex multicellular organisms and, eventually into animals like dinosaurs!

Finally, we examined how our understanding of evolution changed over time. From Darwin's theory of natural selection to Crick, Watson, and Franklin's discovery of DNA's structure 100 years later, our understanding changed dramatically. Today, scientists have mapped out the entire human genome. That's a big win for collective learning!

In Unit 6, we're taking another step forward in complexity. You know what that means. It's time for a new threshold of increasing complexity! In this unit, we meet early humans and dig into the power of collective learning!

The genetic analysis you learned about in the last unit is one of the ways we know about early humans and our connection to other primates.

Another way we know about our connections to other primates is through the work of primatologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists—like those who found, examined, and dated those cave paintings in France.

In this unit, you'll meet more anthropologists, who study human cultures. They work closely with archaeologists who unearth human artifacts and remains.

You'll also meet primatologists like Jane Goodall, who study primate behavior and make comparisons between our primate cousins and humans.

It takes an interdisciplinary team of experts to piece together the early history of humans.

Thanks to centuries of collective learning in these fields, we know the ingredients and Goldilocks Conditions needed for the new complexity of humans to emerge. Humans have powerful brains and symbolic language that allow us to share, record, and pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. That's collective learning.

But collective learning didn't appear suddenly. It's the result of millions of years of evolution. There is evidence that a few early hominid species had this ability. We know this by studying the tools they left behind. When early humans made tools and showed signs of improving those tools over time then that is a sign of collective learning.

Painting of early humans.

How did these early humans live? How did they get food, communicate with others, and share ideas? Well, for the vast majority of human history, we were foragers. We gathered, hunted, and fished for our food. We moved around to find this food and lived in small communities.

7:13

World map charting early human migration.

And we moved around a lot. Beginning around 70,000 years ago, our Homo sapiens ancestors migrated from East Africa to populate the entire world. These early migrants had to adapt to a lot of new environments. Without collective learning, it's unlikely they would have survived and thrived. Over time, we innovated and shared more and more complex information that has allowed us to completely reshape our environments. That's really what makes our species so unique.

Text "Are humans unique?"

I just made a pretty bold claim about humans being unique. Do you believe me? Are we the only species that has the ability to communicate using symbolic language?

7:59

Image of primate learning sign language.

What about parrots or other primates that learn sign language? At this end of this unit, you'll be asked to evaluate these questions. And using evidence you've learned along the way, you'll decide what makes us unique.

Host packing up bag in front of early human animation.

I have to come clean on something. Um. Before today I thought this whole unit on early humans was about the kind of people who show up at eight for a nine o'clock appointment. Not true! I'm collecting more learning every day...



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