

# LLED RESEARCH SEMINAR

## Dinosaurs and discourses of science: What one museum fossil hall teaches about climate science

Dmitri Detwyler | *PhD Student, TESL*

**THURSDAY MARCH 8 | 12:00 - 2:00 p.m.**  
Ponderosa Commons Multipurpose Room (2012)

### Abstract

It has been argued that the United States is facing an “epistemic crisis” (Smith, 2017) characterized by a deep divide in how people come to know things, and what they believe to be true. This divergence has especially serious implications for public understanding and acceptance of the urgent facts of human-caused climate change, and in turn the mitigation of its consequences (Monbiot, 2016). This condition of crisis can be re-specified as a problem of legitimation of different, competing interpretations of the nature of scientific practice and the possibility of scientific knowledge.

In this talk, I adopt a discursive constructionist perspective (Potter & Hepburn, 2008), including membership category analysis and rhetorical versioning, to explore the multiple conceptions of scientific practice produced in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The analysis of texts and exhibits in the dinosaur fossil halls and the mammal / vertebrate fossil halls identifies two competing and largely incompatible orientations to scientific practice and knowledge. The version of ‘science’ constructed in the two dinosaur halls admits only hypothesis testing, and to a lesser extent analogizing with living animals, as sources of reliable knowledge about dinosaurs. It performs a deep pessimism about the possibility of certainty and undermines the legitimacy of scientific expertise. Meanwhile, the version of ‘science’ constructed in the mammal and vertebrate origin halls admits a plurality of methods, and projects optimism about the possibility of future knowledge. Although this contrast may appear local to the domain of paleontology, I argue that the public conflict of constructs contributes directly to our state of epistemic crisis, with detrimental consequences for our understanding and response to intensifying anthropogenic climate change.

### Biostatement

Dmitri Detwyler is a second-year phd student in TESL at UBC. His methodological interests continue to evolve, but include discourse analysis, discursive psychology, and ethnomethodology. He also holds an MA-TESL from the Pennsylvania State University.

**All are welcome, no RSVP needed.**

**This talk will take place on the traditional, unceded, and occupied territories of the Musqueam people.**



*By Connie Ma from Chicago, United States of America - Sue, the world's largest and most complete dinosaur skeleton. Uploaded by FunkMonk, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20207230>*

