



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Danny Dorling – Times Higher Education Biography, 20th February 2014



“I like to make sandcastles on beaches,” says Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the University of Oxford. “To make a good sandcastle you need a warm beach, high-quality sand (it varies with geology) and a stream.

“The stream is the hardest part to get right. It is no good if it’s a trickle and not much fun if it is a sewage outlet. My dad is the Pied Piper of beach sandcastle-making and tends to collect other families on the beach with his amazing waterworks and castles. On a good beach, given enough time, you can end up with more than two dozen (of other peoples’) children helping make a work of art out of just sand and water. My children think this is normal, and if they continue the tradition, then for them and their children it will be.”

Dorling was born in Oxford and raised “in the Cowley and then Risinghurst areas of that city, to the south and east of the centre (the north and west are the wealthier quarters). I do think where you grow up has a huge effect on who you later become.”

He cites an observation he made in a 2001 paper entitled “[How much does place matter?](#)”.

“For me, given my past and my places, I am unlikely ever to be impressed by an A-level grade on its own (or even a string of As), or to believe it is much more than a signpost to your street, school and socialisation. I am unlikely to think that if you do not have a job it is because of your personal failing rather than the choices of the employers in your area, and what in turn affects them and your luck and status when you enter that market. I am unlikely to be convinced that people in Britain do not know these things themselves.”

Dorling continues: “When I say I’m not impressed by a string of As at A level, it’s worth pointing out that I am not involved with university admission at all – other than that I like to study the changing geographical patterns to them.”

“I am not a super-confident speaker. I was never taught to do public speaking, for instance, and my spelling and grammar can probably be described as awful. But I think I was lucky to go to a normal school where everyone who lived around me also went. Being crammed to pass exams well at a young age is overvalued and doesn’t teach you much of great use for later in life.”

Of his early years, Dorling recalls: “I was not a particularly studious child, but I had a very stimulating childhood. I was the slowest to learn to read in my class. I learned at age 8 in Wood Farm Primary in Oxford. I was a very slow developer and much later found out that I am dyslexic.

“Being slow was not too much of a problem for me, because I went to a normal school with a wide range of kids in it. I was not set or streamed by ability until around age 13, and developed mostly from age 16 onwards. My O levels were not that good, but at age 16 I was good enough not to be asked to take CSEs. A few years later these two exams were merged into the GCSE, so the distinction is only meaningful if you are both old enough to remember it and didn’t go to a school where you did one, or the other, or none. It was only really when I got to do A levels, and no longer had to work on things I really was not very good at, that I began to stand out.”

There were, he says, people who inspired him along the way. “I do remember particular teachers – in primary, middle and secondary schools, and also particularly keen young university lecturers who made a difference. I always think it is a bit unfair to pick them out, but they know who they are.”

Of his time at Newcastle University, where he undertook both undergraduate and doctoral study, Dorling notes: “I was not that unusual an undergraduate, other than that I had the same girlfriend all the way from secondary school through to postgraduate studies.

“I was a much more unusual postgraduate student. I worked far too hard and finished my PhD within two years. My brother Ben was killed on the Oxford ring road in 1989 when he was coming back from school. He was hit by a speeding car. He was in his last year at school.

“This happened between when I finished my undergraduate degree and started my PhD, so I threw myself into my doctoral work because I was angry about Ben dying so young. Most other people of my age, at least those who now work in universities who I most mix with, can remember when the Berlin Wall came down and all the events before and shortly after that time. I can’t remember any of that. I don’t think I watched the news or saw TV much that year.”

Before becoming an academic, Dorling worked in early years education. “The pay was £3 an hour, which was not bad for the 1980s, if you had no one else to support, which I didn’t. My rent as a student in Newcastle upon Tyne was £9 a

week in my second year and £13 a week in my third year in 1987 and 1988. And because so many people didn't have jobs, and also so few got to go on to university, I felt lucky."

His academic career has included posts at Newcastle, the universities of Bristol, Leeds and Sheffield, the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and a visiting professorship at Goldsmiths, University of London. He took up a chair at Oxford in September 2013.

That post brought him full circle, geographically; after leaving Oxford aged 18 for Newcastle, he returned aged 46. He shares a home in Oxford with his wife, Alison Dorling, "and three children, although I try not to say much more about them because they (kindly) have not yet said much about me in print! But they are lovely."

The best thing about the city, he says, "is the 20mph sign on the road outside my window. I worry much less about my kids and other children living in a place with 20mph speed limits on most streets. And some of the old buildings in Oxford are quite nice. But what is most vexing about Oxford is that it is the most expensive area of Britain to try to be housed in outside of London. It needs some more housing. Fortunately it is also very flat, so building a little more housing around the edge (off the floodplain) would not spoil many peoples' views."

In addition to recent high-profile monographs – among them *Population 10 Billion*, *Unequal Health: The Scandal of Our Times* and *The 32 Stops*, all published in 2013 – Dorling is increasingly engaging with, and his views are sought by, policymakers.

Is it worth the effort? "Yes. If you have the patience needed to make good sandcastle that are made only to get washed away by the next tide, then you can deal with policy and politics. Almost all policymakers and many politicians are very well-meaning, often very experienced, and can teach you something too.

Dorling adds: "Dealing with particularly cynical or supercilious academics can be much harder than working with the most hard-nosed of policymakers. There is something about basing an institution on the idea of cleverness that means that if academics are not careful, university life can become less about understanding and more about performing. But there are always new frustrations that come along and help you forget the old ones!"

Karen Shook

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/all-that-is-solid-by-danny-dorling/2011337.article>