

HOPEFUL GEOGRAPHY IN ACTION



HOPEFULNESS – An active assembly

David Alcock

alcockblog / @DavidAlcock1

LEFT: Students being given one of the questions, before standing by their chosen answer

Leaving school is simultaneously an exciting and worrying time for students.

I was asked to deliver an assembly to our Year 13s on their last day in school to try to foster a sense of hope and positivity in them, and I decided to do this by:

- Showing them how far the world had come in terms of access to education and some other metrics of 'social progress' in the past 200 years
- Asking them to consider how far the world has yet to go on this journey
- Encouraging them to play their part in a co-operative and socially beneficial future for the world

This was no small task in 20 minutes, but it was worth a shot. In an added twist, I took the assembly outside, using a megaphone, student volunteers, hazard tape, clothes pegs, and a fence!

The following is as near as possible to the script I delivered!

Good morning everyone! It's time for a quiz. You are in a privileged position. You are about to leave school with good qualifications, and you are about to enter the next stage of your life, whether that be higher education, apprenticeships, or jobs. This morning, I'd like us to go global...

1. How many people in the **world** have attained a basic, primary, education?

My three volunteers are holding signs: 17%, 49% and 86%. Stand next to the volunteer who is showing the answer you think is correct.

[About half of those present chose 49%, and most of the rest chose 17%.]



Students standing in groups showing 17% (left), 49% (middle) and 86% (right)

2. Next, how many adults in the world do you think are able to read to about the standard which would enable them to take a full role in society? Move places now if you wish to change.

[Most students stayed in the same place.]

3. Finally, the average 30-year-old man on this planet has spent ten years in education. How long has an average 30-year-old woman spent? Five, seven, or nine years?

[Over half of the students chose seven, with only a few choosing nine.]

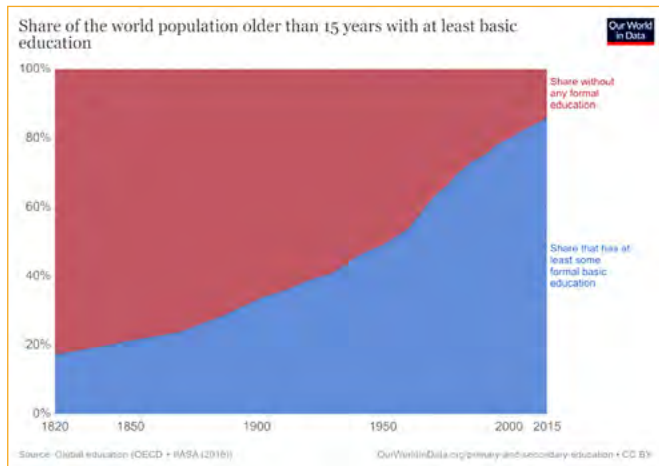
Thank you volunteers and thanks to the rest of you for moving around.

It's time for the answers.

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Those who said 17% of people in the world had attained a basic, primary, education – well, you would have been right – if it was 1820. Those who said 49% – you would have been right, if it was 1950. The actual answer was 86%, and this also applies to the literacy question too.

And you can probably guess from those two questions that 30-year-old women have spent nine years in school, as opposed to ten for men.



Share of the world population older than 15 years with at least basic education, 1820–2015 Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/primary-and-secondary-education>

Which direction is the world heading in?

These answers are not perfect – in an ideal world, we’d hope that *all* children would be educated to at least a primary level, and that *all* adults would be able to read. We’d also hope that there would be gender parity in terms of educational access. But the world has been moving in the right direction in terms of education. Not quickly – in fact, you might say, not quickly enough – but we do appear to be getting there.

Let’s look at two more changes that have happened that may give you more faith in humanity as you go into the wider world.

Could I have three more volunteers?

[Three volunteers come up and stand in front of a tall fence, which has been turned into a large line graph; 0%, 50% and 100% labels have been affixed on the y-axis up to 2m height, and 1820, 1920 and 2020 labels have been affixed up to 4m across the x-axis.]



Let’s turn to poverty. Extreme poverty, in fact. Living on less than \$1.90 a day, adjusted to allow for inflation. That’s less than is necessary to enable us to do much more than just survival. Could my three volunteers decide what they think this level was in 1820?

[Volunteers discuss, then attach a long strip of red and white barrier tape on the fence with a peg at the % they think it was in 1820.]

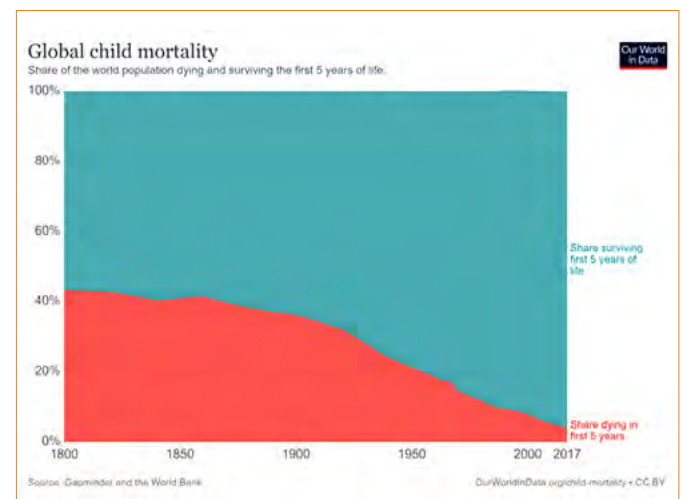
It was 84%. So you’ll need to move it to 84%. Now how about 1920? *[Let them decide, attaching the tape with pegs.]* It had only dropped to 70%. *[Move the tape if necessary.]* 1950? *[Ditto.]* It had only fallen to 65%. And finally, 2018? *[Ditto; my volunteers chose about 20%.]* It had fallen to just 9%.

The UN has set a goal to eliminate extreme poverty by 2030. The pandemic and entrenched inequalities mean that this date is now unlikely to be met, but it should be doable in the following decade. I’ll say it again – it’s not good enough – but again, looking how far we have come can give us scope for hope.

Please give a round of applause for our volunteers.

Finally, can I have three more volunteers. We’ll now look at child mortality – the number of children dying before their fifth birthday. An immensely sad statistic. *[Repeat the exercise: the figures are 1820: 43%, 1920: 30%, 1950: 20% and 2019: 4%; my volunteers were closer this time.]*

Again, this isn’t where we could be by a long way, but looking at what we have achieved can give us hope.



Global child mortality. Share of the world population dying and surviving the first 5 years of life. Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/primary-and-secondary-education>

Thank you again to our volunteers.

LEFT: Students guessing what % of the world’s population lived in extreme poverty in 1820

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Faith in humanity

I hope you found that interesting. Here's one more thing I'd like you to think about and respond to.

- How many of you sometimes despair of humanity? Hands up... [I put mine up too.]
- And how many of you take time out to celebrate humanity? Hands up... [fewer hands will probably go up!]
- Why do we tend to celebrate humanity less often than we despair of it?

You may well have thought of this – and my geographers have certainly been involved in these discussions. It's a mixture of the media – mainstream and social, your psychological biases, and perhaps even your education.

So could – and should – you start to celebrate what humanity has achieved?

Well, you may want to think about how you can measure its achievements. What should be our metrics? Should we measure achievements in terms of more people becoming healthy, wealthy and wise? In terms of *liberte, fraternite* and *egalite*? Or life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? This is worth thinking about.

Let's not kid ourselves – there are huge challenges facing the world, from climate change, inequality, and various forms of discrimination.

But this is where **you** come in.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

As you step out into the wider world, could – and should – you think about what role **you** can play in helping humanity to flourish, without sacrificing the planet we live on?

Firstly, it is worth recognising, as Isaac Newton did in a 1675 letter to Robert Hooke, that "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". Think of the giants – your predecessors – who have helped to achieve the huge leaps forward shown by today's figures and graphs. Could **you** help humanity see further?

Then, consider what Walt Whitman wrote in 'O Me! O Life!': bear in mind...

"That you are here – that life exists, and identity. That the powerful play goes on, and you many contribute a verse".

So, the world is big, the future is daunting, and you will want to carve out your own path, to do what's right for you and your loved ones. But you also have a role to play in a **wider** world, where you can help to continue

these trends, and to carve out a more hopeful path for the world: to manage climate change, reduce racial discrimination, and to narrow the obscene inequality gap.

Can you do it? Are these just empty words?

No. they are not just empty words.

If I had stood here 400 years ago, and I asked my students to play their role in ending slavery, there would have been incredulity.

If I had stood here 130 years ago, asking you to play your role in gaining women's right to vote, own property and vote, there would have been disbelief that these things could happen.

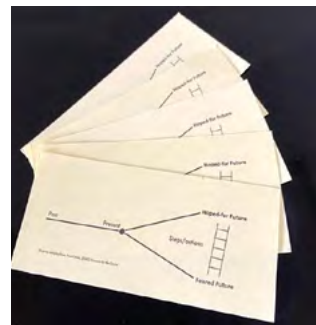
If I had stood here 40 years ago, saying that the Berlin Wall would fall, and that apartheid would collapse in South Africa – and these things seemed unlikely when I was still at school – would you have believed me?

How about 30 years ago, and I described the Internet?

Or five years ago, if I had said that polio – a disease which killed or injured millions of people a year – would now only be found in one country, what would have been your response?

These changes didn't come about automatically. Through a complex mixture of processes, people made them. People like you.

Shaping a hopeful future



I'll be issuing you with future timeline cards later, as a reminder that **the future has not yet been made, and that you can shape a more hopeful, rather than a more fearful, future.** You may want to keep it, to remind you of this.

So, your path may be varied or linear, it may be in business or healthcare, in development, politics or volunteering. You may well take your place in a civil society by voting, reading, and making informed decisions. But **you** can stand on the shoulders of giants, and **you** can contribute a verse.

Thank you, and *Hoc Age!* Just do it!

Feedback during the assembly and afterwards was positive; I hope you will be inspired to try this out, or at least to critique it!

Best wishes for summer to anyone who got this far in the post! David

Source: <https://alcock.blog/2021/07/08/hopefulness-an-active-assembly/>