

The Anthropology of Development and Humanitarianism  
Dr Chika Watanabe  
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Anthropological analyses of development and humanitarianism tend to be critical of aid interventions. The starting assumption is that despite the intentions to do good, there can be unintended consequences that reproduce unequal and unjust structures. Most of the students in the Anthropology of Development and Humanitarianism course unit join the class because they want to help others and perhaps become aid workers themselves. Reading all the critical analyses of aid, however, by week two or three many students are disillusioned.

But the aim of the class is not to discourage students from entering a humanitarian career path; rather, it is to make them aware that recognizing the potential unintended consequences of good intentions should make aid workers take responsibility for their actions, not to feel guilty. Critical thinking skills and not idealism should be the foundation of any efforts to do good.

The Diversifying in the Curriculum fund helped me achieve this aim by supporting students make tabletop games to explore and express how anthropological analyses can help advance understandings of development and humanitarian issues. The goal was to create a game that they could play with aid/charity workers who would visit the class in the last week of the semester. By having the opportunity to explore what they learn with practitioners, students could balance the critical analyses with the realities of aid/charity work.

The students worked in small groups throughout the whole semester, developing their teamworking skills in addition to the creative thinking they had to apply in producing the games. The activity also required each group to write a short essay to explain the academic rationale for their game. This combination of written and non-textual outputs played to students' individual needs and learning styles, as some could choose to help more with the writing or the creative work depending on their strengths and preferences.

Students ended up creating amazing games that were thoughtful as well as fun to play. They thought of numerous situations and challenges facing aid workers, refugees, governments, and other actors in development and humanitarian contexts, showing immense insights into the issues and theories. For example, one group adapted Monopoly so that players acted like asylum seekers trying to secure all the necessary documents to stay in the country but, as they write, it is 'a game where you are never completely safe and you can go from poor to rich and vice versa', which reflected the precarious and frustrating experience of those seeking safe haven.

The students' work is presented here (see entries for 2024-2025 under each topic):  
<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/anthropology-of-aid/the-issues/>.

Scenes from the final event with aid workers can be found here:

<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/anthropology-of-aid/meeting-aid-workers/2024-2025-final-event/>

The students seemed ecstatic to have participated in this activity. One student said: 'I thought it was a fun way to engage what we have learned throughout the semester creatively, and it was refreshing to not just have to write a long essay'. Others came up to me at the end of the last class to tell me how much they enjoyed making games and working with other students. Several of them told me that they shared what they had learned in the class with their family and friends, and a couple of them said they were going to play the game they made with their relatives over Christmas.

There were two challenges to consider for the future:

- One student commented that, while they liked making games and the group work, 'making a game out of someone's lived experience... felt a bit iffy'. In the future, I will present this dilemma to students at the start so that they can consider this ethical question when designing their games.
- A couple of the visitors who had been coming to the class for years commented that they enjoyed the games, but that they had less time to have open discussions with students than previous years. The next time I do this activity, I will make sure to create enough time for free discussion at the last event.

Making games allowed students to articulate their academic learning in new and creative ways. The group work developed important employability skills and also created a sense of community in the class. And overall, the project made teaching much more fun! Given the multifaceted benefits of this activity, I will be implementing this method in future years as well.