
*Reflection*

# Teaching Development Studies in the Current Era: Understanding and Hope

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## Abstract

This reflective article examines the challenges of teaching Development Studies in a contemporary context marked by global conflict, democratic backsliding, and the erosion of international norms. It argues that the discipline, while inherently interdisciplinary and critically oriented, must grapple with its colonial legacies and the difficulty of defining 'development' itself. Against a backdrop of war, inequality and diminishing global cooperation, the article highlights the tension between fostering critical awareness of power structures and sustaining a sense of hope among students. Drawing on pedagogical theory and practice, it emphasises the importance of reflexive, non-didactic teaching that engages students' lived experiences while avoiding oversimplification of complex global dynamics. The article explores how concepts of power can be taught in ways that reveal structural inequalities without reinforcing fatalism or disengagement. It further considers the role of hope—not as naive optimism, but as a recognition of open futures—in maintaining student agency. Ultimately, the piece calls for renewed dialogue on how to teach Development Studies in ways that are critically rigorous, ethically grounded, and responsive to the uncertainties of the current era.

Development Studies in Australia is a growing discipline, although one that is increasingly under threat as courses are streamlined at universities across the country. It is a discipline that requires extensive self-reflexivity if we are to teach it in a manner that is non-didactic and engages meaningfully with students' personal experiences. Teaching this subject should also not replicate the colonial and oppressive structures that are historically embedded within the discipline. Much of the pedagogy in Development Studies ideally enables students to critically evaluate their own reality and the structures of power in the world, drawing on their own knowledge and experience. Yet the challenge here is to help students have a better understanding of the world and what global 'development' encompasses, without compromising hope. This challenge is the motivation behind this reflective piece, which aims at prompting ongoing discussion on the teaching of Development Studies as a discipline in the current era.

## What is Development?

While I refer to Development Studies as a 'discipline', in reality, Development Studies draws together many fields, embodying 'interdisciplinarity'. This is both a strength and a weakness. For the most part, I see this as a strength. Development Studies gains theoretical and methodological richness through engagement with Geography, Anthropology, Political Science, Social Work, International Relations, Economics, Sociology and Political Economy – amongst other disciplines. It would be a substantive loss if Development Studies scholars were only exposed to theory from one of these areas. Like many other interdisciplinary subjects, however, Development Studies can be somewhat nebulous and difficult to define. For some, it is seen as a colonial endeavour, whereas for others, it is an opportunity to challenge coloniality (Kapoor, 2023).

Part of the issue with defining Development Studies is the problem with characterising 'development'. Is development 'good change', as Robert Chambers (1997) famously discussed? Is it more akin to modernisation as progress (Rostow, 1959)? Or is it an intrinsic element of the expansion of global capitalism (Hart, 2010)? Part of the work of teaching Development Studies is parsing out these different meanings, all of which have highly significant implications for how we approach the practice of 'development' today.

The differing definitions of Development and Development Studies also result in contesting timelines in the teaching. While there is much written about 'development' as a post-World War II endeavour with the advent of the United Nations and large-scale interventions such as the Marshall Plan, others have argued that we must address the colonial roots of development if we are to explain its form meaningfully (Kothari and Klein, 2023). This approach has significant merit: retracing the history of

development from the peak period of European colonialism highlights not only the historical origins of wealth and the divides between the Global North and South, but it also enables students to better connect with the enduring presence of coloniality today.

## Development Studies in a Time of Genocide, War and the Dismantling of International Order

When I first undertook Development Studies in the mid-2000s, there was more optimism about the state of the world. Despite the occurrence of large anti-globalisation protests, the second Iraq war and the outrage towards Western leaders and their duplicity, the overriding sentiment appeared to be that we could and would hold these war criminals to account one day. Furthermore, carried over optimism from the end of the Cold War seemed to coalesce with momentum for achieving the Millenium Development Goals (Greig and Turner, 2024). This was particularly pronounced as we witnessed populations, such as in parts of China, increasingly stepping out of endemic poverty (Montalvo and Ravallion, 2010).

Yet today, rather than understanding the world to be in a state of progress, various indicators demonstrate regression or stagnation. Whether we look at the systematic dismantling of women's rights across multiple countries (Onsmark and Björkdahl, 2026) or the halting of global poverty reduction (Roser, 2026), we do not live in an era that justifies significant optimism. For women's rights, the aim is largely to defend against further deteriorations, with the knowledge that attempting to uphold previously endorsed global commitments bears the risk of these being overturned (Penovic, 2026).

Framing this era is also the blatant disregard of international law, including international humanitarian law, as evidenced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (OHCHR, 2024) and Israel and the United States' attack on Iran and Lebanon (OHCHR, 2026). Rather than viewing these instances as specific and bounded acts of aggression, these war crimes illustrate not only the decay of the hegemonic multilateral order (Alami et al., 2026) and the decline of global liberalism and peace (Richmond, 2025), but also the rise of domestic authoritarianism, whereby leaders decide on acts of war based on their individual 'feelings' (Al Jazeera, 2026).

Nowhere is this disregard for international law more apparent than in the genocide in Gaza and Jared Kushner's 'master plan' for the region (Loshitzky, 2025). Despite flagrant and repeated breaches of international law and the conclusion by the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry (2025)—in addition to Amnesty International (2024), Human Rights Watch (2024) and genocide scholars (IAGS, 2025)—that Israel has indeed been committing genocide in Gaza,

Israel has continued in its persecution of Palestinians (Amnesty International, 2025), funded and supported by the United States and its allies. While other heinous human rights abuses, including genocide, occur in other regions, including in Darfur, nowhere is the West's complicity more evident than in Gaza. This genocide has been buoyed by a constant stream of media dehumanisation of Palestinians. For example, the Centre for Media Monitoring in the UK (2025) reported that the BBC gave Israeli deaths 33 times more coverage than those of Palestinians, despite Gaza experiencing 34 times more casualties than Israel.

In this context, how do we discuss any positive overarching global architecture for development? The very notion of human dignity, foundational in the forging of the United Nations (Dulhunty, 2022) has been completely disregarded by current world powers. While this disregard for human life and suffering is not new, it appears unbounded at present. It demonstrates the erosion of any pretence of a Liberal International Order (Mearsheimer, 2019) that was seen to structure the global world environment that Development Studies sought to analyse. While Mark Carney was not describing Gaza, but rather American belligerence more generally, his speech at the World Economic Forum (Carney, 2026), calling for an end to the pretence of the Liberal International Order, is apt. Despite their substantive issues, the Sustainable Development Goals offered at least aspirations for ending poverty and inequality within a global structure of liberalism. Yet with the vast reductions in aid assistance announced especially by the US, UK and various EU countries (Centre for Global Development, 2026), there is little sense that anyone is working towards achieving these goals. Rather, national interest appears to be paramount and any sense of shared collective ideals (real or imagined) seems relegated to the past.

## Despair and Hope

For Development Studies students, the state of the world can be deeply dispiriting. The sense of looming anxiety is made worse by the climate crisis, with its existential threat to humanity. Yet not all students are across the gravity of these global threats. Some are unaware of dominant global structures of power, or they hold on to nationalistic ideals. Educators have a role to unravel and disclose the structures of power that permeate our lives and shape 'development' more broadly. At the same time, our role as educators is not to evangelise to students nor insist that students take on our beliefs. Students must feel free to forge their own diverse opinions, supported by evidence and scholarship.

What does this mean for the teaching of Development Studies? While much of Development Studies is historical, we cannot ignore current Global North/South relations. Foundational concepts such as Bourdieu's *doxa* (1972) and Lukes' *invisible power* (1975) shed light on how we may unravel the way that power operates to

maintain support for influential actors and agreed upon social norms. Part of the aim is to reveal the interests of the powerful behind discourse in public policy and to see why certain ideas have gained traction and others have not (Cairney, 2019). One such example can be seen from the individualistic emphasis on households tackling the climate crisis, for example through recycling. While, of course, there is nothing wrong with individual actions, an over-emphasis on these solutions ultimately obfuscates the overly representative climate emissions from large corporations, billionaires and the military (Papin and Beauregard, 2024). The question for students then becomes in whose interest this mainstream discourse of individualised responsibility is retold. This does not mean that analysis should be overly simplistic: it is too easy to say, for example, that the Global North is 'bad' while the Global South is virtuous, without addressing the corrupt elites running many Global South countries and expropriating wealth at rapid rates. Pedagogically, we need to be careful of oversimplifying structures of power in a way that denies their complexity.

Helping students to understand the dynamics of power and politics can, however, be thoroughly dispiriting. A workshop entitled 'Pedagogies of hope: teaching and learning in a time of crisis', organised by Associate Professor Sarah Milne at the Crawford School of Public Policy on 7th November 2025, highlighted the very difficult balance of enabling students to have the tools to be aware of power structures, while also maintaining some semblance of hope. Although fully aware of the way that hope has been used to cover up real and legitimate indignation (e.g. Chelsea Watego's 2021 proclamation to 'fuck hope'), Associate Professor Alice Beban from Massey University, Aotearoa / New Zealand, argued that we can think of hope in a way that is not ignorant to despair (see also Beban and Korson, 2025). During the workshop, when speaking of how to do this practically, Dr Beban discussed in particular the role of connecting students to community work and engaging them in substantive projects that aim to tackle real world problems. Ultimately, this loss in hope is a loss of agency. The larger and darker global problems appear, the more we seem to be bound by structural inevitability towards destruction. On reflection, one can see how weekly teachings on various global problems - from climate change to gender inequality to exploitation of the Global South - can make one feel powerless, as though global destruction were inevitable and we were mere bystanders. However, as Dr Beban mentioned, Ernst Bloch's (1955) idea that hope is the non-foreclosed remains especially important here. As long as we do not think that our future and the future of the world is pre-determined, there is always the prospect for change. As bleak as the world may seem, the future is unknown and this leaves scope for positive change. This is an important concept that students can be asked to contemplate, alongside understanding structures of power.

Related propositions are those of ‘appreciative inquiry’ or ‘strengths-based approaches’ (Dureau et al., 2022), which can also be used to teach students about development practice. Certainly, it is important to stress that these methods are not without their criticisms and students need to be made aware of the issues surrounding them, especially if they are adopted with rigidity. At the heart of these approaches, however, it may be possible to reclaim something optimistic to counter the sense of powerlessness facing many communities in both the Global North and the Global South, who are the targets of ‘development’.

Hope should therefore be actively considered alongside the centering of power analysis in Development Studies. It is in this context that this reflection has explored what teaching Development Studies means today, as we face existential challenges from the climate crisis to a world order in flux. It meditates on what it means to be an educator discussing power, privilege and politics with students in a way that is revealing but non-didactic. By drawing together disparate ideas, such as the notion of hope, alongside the challenge of promoting critical thinking amongst students, this reflection encourages a broader conversation on how to effectively teach Development Studies in this era.

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