

## Reflection Essay: UniHelp – Designing a Mutual Aid Platform for Post-Secondary Students in Greater Vancouver

UniHelp is an applied project of a mutual aid focused app created for post secondary students in the Greater Vancouver area. The main idea of this project is to make it easier for students to help each other by sharing resources, knowledge, and support in one digital space. Instead of struggling alone, students could use UniHelp to give and receive aid. As a design student, I built this project in Figma, using theories about solidarity and cooperation and turning them into a simple , user-friendly interactive design. Alongside the app, I also designed posters that explain the problem statement , solution, and research. This reflection will explain the problem I wanted to solve, the design process, the theory I used, and the connection between mutual aid ideas and the project itself with the two readings that I mainly focused on: Errico Malatesta's An Anarchist Programme, and Maeckelbergh's Doing is Believing.

The idea for UniHelp came from real problems that many students in Greater Vancouver face. University life is expensive. Students often deal with financial struggles, food insecurity, and high textbook costs. Housing is also expensive in the Greater Vancouver Area, which makes things even harder. On top of that, many students feel lonely and isolated, especially international students who may not have family nearby. We often forget that post secondary students are one of the weaker communities in our society.

There are so many hidden factors that affect usL the pressure to succeed academically. Stress from part time jobs, high rent, transportation costs, and limited access to mental health support. These struggles may not always be visible, but they have a big effect on students' well -being. By creating a space like UniHelp, students can support each other and reduce some of these hidden burdens.

We can look beyond some individual cities and notice how universities in the same area often build strong connections. For example, In the US, places like the Boston area show strong examples of university collaboration. Schools such as Harvard, MIT and Boston University often host joint events, sharing resources , and creating opportunities that benefit students across campuses. In China, Guangzhou University City (廣州大學城) stands out as a cluster where multiple universities are physically connected, making collaboration, shared facilities, and community events a daily reality for students . These examples not only bring new ideas and perspectives, but also create a sense of shared identity and solidarity across institutions. When schools connect, they form networks that help support each other, creating a bond that benefits students academically, socially, and emotionally. UniHelp could be a tool to encourage this kind of collaboration by making it easier for students across different campuses to work together. I chose to design a digital app because students already rely on their phones for information and connection. By creating a prototype and matching posters,I wanted to show how design can turn ideas like solidarity into a tool that students could actually use in daily life.

The two readings shaped the foundation of UniHelp: Malatesta's An Anarchist Programme and Maeckelbergh's Doing is Believing. Malatesta explains that systems of power and authority often block cooperation, so people must create their own structures of support. Anarchism is not just about rejecting control but also about building better ways of caring for each other. UniHelp reflects this idea because it is a student to student system, not controlled by the school or by businesses. Students decide what to post, how to heal and what events to run. Maeckelbergh focuses on the idea of prefiguration: living and practicing the future society we want in the present. She shows that alternative communities do not just talk about change, they do it through daily practices of cooperation, sharing, and decision making. This connects directly to UniHelp. The app is not just a plan for the future but a way for students to start practicing solidarity now. By exchanging resources, hosting events, and offering support, students would be creating a small example of a more cooperative world.

Together, Malatesta and Maeckelbergh show two important parts of mutual aid. Malatesta explains why we must build alternatives outside authority, while Maeckelbergh explains how practicing these alternatives now creates real changes. UniHelp is an idea that tries to combine both: it is a student-led system free from hierarchy, and it is also a way of living solidarity in everyday life.

The design process for UniHelp focused on user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) design. The main goal was not just to create something that looked visually good but to make sure the app was useful, clear, and easy to navigate for students.

**Research Phase (UX):** I gathered insights from the problems students face—like textbook costs, food insecurity, and lack of community. These issues became the basis for the app's main features. I also thought about user pain points, such as trust, ease of navigation, and privacy.

**User Flow (UX):** I created a journey map to outline how a student might move through the app, from logging in to posting an item or joining an event. This helped me design a clear structure where actions felt simple and logical.

**Wireframing (UX/UI):** Before working on visuals, I sketched wireframes to test layout ideas. For example, the posting system needed to be quick and easy so users wouldn't give up halfway. I focused on having simple icons and text prompts for clarity.

**Interface Design (UI):** For the visual identity, I only used blue tones. Blue was chosen because it communicates trust, calmness, and reliability. I worked with different shades to create hierarchy—darker blues for headers and lighter blues for backgrounds. The typography and spacing were chosen for clarity and readability on small screens.

**Prototype (UX/UI):** In Figma, I built an interactive prototype so users could click through pages. The prototype included a login page, browsing system, and event section. The interactive design let me test whether the flow made sense.

**Supporting Posters:** The posters were designed with consistency in branding but also acted as part of the user journey. The problem statement poster introduced the issue, while the solution poster acted like an onboarding tool, inviting students to try UniHelp. The main **features** of UniHelp include: **Posting System** (seek/ offer aid), **Event Hosting** (such as workshop, community kitchen, or social meet up), **Communication Page** (allows students to connect and create group discussion).

The biggest design challenge was keeping the app simple but still useful. I had to make sure the interface avoided clutter while still giving students the tools they needed. Another concern was trust and safety. A future version would include student verification and privacy features to make users feel secure. However it was really inspiring to explore different mutual aid ideas from various regions and points in history, and it was exciting to design a modern mutual aid system made specifically for post secondary students in the Greater Vancouver area.

During the presentation on August 14th. I presented the app prototype with all the features: login page, posting and browsing system, an event page, and a user journey map. I also designed posters to promote the app. One poster focused on the community aspect, while another explained the problem statement. The user journey map showed how a student might first discover UniHelp, login, and then use it to access resources or attend events. I felt privileged to present this project and I appreciate that many peers asked questions which helped me to explain my idea in an even better way!

This Project helped me to understand that design is not just about making things look nice. It also reflects values and ideas. Through UniHelp, I realized design can also be political and social. It can create small examples of bigger ideas, like anarchism and solidarity. I learned that even a simple prototype, combined with posters and promotion, can show anarchist theory in action. Designing UniHeko was like practicing mutual aid on a small scale. It also made me realize that students want to and can help each other if they are given tools and resources. Another key lesson was about balance. It is easy to imagine a perfect app, but much harder to design one that students would actually use. This reflects the balance in anarchist ideas too: they are both visionary and practical. UniHelp tries to hold both sides. It imagines a better way of supporting each other, but also pays attention to real life limits and needs.

Looking forward, I would like to continue to finish UniHelp and let it be a part of my future portfolio. I believe that the project will demonstrate how design can combine social theory with practical solutions for student life! I will extend the app by adding features like verified accounts. More privacy protections, and a more advanced multilingual access to support international students. I will also explore how posters and social campaigns could spread awareness across campuses. And just like how schools sometimes collaborate on big community projects. I imagine UniHelp being used to connect different universities together. In this way, students could not only support their own peers but also strengthen ties across campuses, sharing events and resources in a larger network. Most importantly, building strong human-human interaction (the foundation of mutual aid), which is the most important part of our lives as humans!

## Work Cited

Malatesta, Errico. An Anarchist Programme. 1920. Reprinted in The Anarchist Library.

Maeckelbergh, Marianne. "Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement." *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–20.

Kropotkin, Pëtr. "Anarchism." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910. The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-anarchism-from-the-encyclopaedia-britannica>.