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Playful leadership as a method to encourage better relationships and engagement on student-student peer mentoring schemes

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KEYWORDS

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Student leadership
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ABSTRACT

Student peer mentors often occupy an ambiguous leadership role that requires them to build trust, communicate effectively, and support new students during their transition into higher education (HE). At the same time, sector-wide pressures toward measurement, accountability, and performance can constrain relational, human-centred approaches that mentoring depends upon. This article explores whether playful leadership—a relational stance that uses playfulness to reduce hierarchy, build connection, and foster openness—might support Peer Mentors in navigating these challenges, particularly on widening participation (WP) schemes which center on social congruence. This theorising motivated a pilot training workshop delivered at the University of Exeter, in which the playful leadership principles outlined in this article were introduced to student Mentors on WP mentoring schemes. Early and informal reflections suggest that playful leadership may strengthen Mentor–Mentee relationships by reducing formality and supporting a sense of community, with further research required in this area.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is increasingly foregrounding measurement, monitoring, and performance metrics as indicators of quality. This shift toward enumeration (Ball, 2015) in education can prioritise quantifiable outcomes over learning for curiosity, enjoyment, or personal development. The pressure on universities to demonstrate value through numerical indicators—such as student satisfaction scores or continuation rates—has only intensified amid the sector's widening marketisation and the drive to maintain institutional stability (DfE, DWP, & DSIT, 2025; UCAS, 2025). Within this environment, relational, human-centred forms of support risk being undervalued or reduced to interventions that must themselves be justified through measurable impact.

This emphasis on accountability stands in stark contrast to research highlighting the academic, social, and emotional benefits of active, playful learning approaches, which are shown to motivate learners and support

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deeper engagement (Blinkoff et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). As scholars increasingly explore how play might enrich learning and leadership in adult and HE contexts (Koeners & Francis, 2020; Høflod, 2022; Forbes, 2021), it is timely to consider its potential within student-led support structures.

Student-student peer mentoring relies fundamentally on connection, trust, and human interaction. These are all elements that play can foster through encouraging teamwork, conflict resolution, and empathy (London School of Childcare Studies, 2024). Yet mentoring risks becoming transactional or bureaucratised when framed primarily as an institutional mechanism to achieve retention targets (Ball, 2015; Norman, 2023). This article examines whether adopting a playful leadership stance might help student Mentors build more authentic relationships with their Mentees and overcome the relational challenges that often impede the effectiveness of mentoring schemes.

Student Peer Mentors: A complex and ambiguous leadership role

What is peer mentoring?

Peer mentoring is widely used across HE to support transitions, belonging, and retention. Where effectively implemented, peer mentoring has positive emotional and psychological wellbeing impacts on students (Le et al, 2024). Definitions of mentoring vary across schemes and institutions (Gun et al, 2016; Andreanoff et al., 2024), but most position Mentors as more 'experienced' students who offer guidance, reassurance, and information to newer peers (Yomtov et al., 2015). The naming conventions signal the intention of the scheme, and thereby the duties of the Mentor figure (e.g. Table 1). However, by framing Mentors as the 'more experienced student', there is an implicit leadership quality bestowed upon them regardless of scheme type.

Table 1

Different types of student-student peer mentoring

Name	How it runs	Purpose
Peer-assisted study sessions (PASS)	Based on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model (Ody and Carey, 2009), PASS is typically a structured programme of sessions attached to challenging modules or topics within a degree course to help student Mentees discuss ideas and resolve questions arising from the core teaching.	Academic

Peer-assisted learning (PAL)	**PAL** is based on the SI-PASS model, but usually designed by the student Mentors delivering sessions within the mentoring scheme under staff support (Hargreaves et al., 2022).	Academic
Peer mentoring or buddy up schemes	Mentors offer guidance on non-academic topics as part of the transition to university (Frith et al., 2017). Such schemes are often provided as voluntary/opt-in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities (Chilvers, 2024)	Pastoral

In other types of mentoring such as staff-staff, the Mentor's role as leader is well-defined within the scheme description or insinuated by hierarchy and pay grades. Such clarification is trickier in student-student mentoring, especially where there are staff involved in the logistics of running schemes – the most common approach found in Andreanoff et al.'s latest review of UK peer learning (2024) – as this may undermine who student Mentees perceive as the 'leader'.

Balancing leadership with belonging and trust in mentoring

The emphasis in peer mentoring, which separates it from other types of training or tutoring, is on a personal, emotionally supportive relationship and building trust (Yomtov et al., 2017; Karcher et al, 2006). On an academic level, Mentors can understand Mentees' learning difficulties and provide suitable advice and strategies because they have overcome similar difficulties. As outlined by Garcia-Melgar et al. (2021), this cognitive congruence - combined with the social congruence expressed through Mentors' ability to empathise with students' motivations as fellow students - allows Mentees to develop trust in Mentors as sources of support and creates the effective peer relationships that make mentoring successful. The goals and objectives or university peer mentoring programmes may even "pertain to similar benefits as friendship"; however, crucially, these programmes are "more structured than a friendship relationship", leaving Mentors treading a fine line between the roles of friend and confidante (Frith et al., 2017, p. 6). Mentors must balance approachability with responsibility, authority with informality, and familiarity with professional boundaries.

This dual identity can result in an ambiguous and sometimes uncomfortable leadership position. For example, some PAL and PASS schemes are embedded in the curriculum and therefore not voluntary (Bennett et al, 2018; Schaffer et al., 2021), which can make Mentors appear more like teaching staff enforcing attendance and

learning. However, the purpose of *students* acting as Mentors originates largely from the fact that when students are in distress, they tend to turn to other students first rather than professional or staff support (Byrom, 2018). In a time where students have been 'repositioned as consumers' (Jayman et al, 2022, p.2), personalised support through mentoring can help them feel seen in increasingly large, impersonal cohorts (Norman, 2023). If the Mentor is seen as too formalised a position, this may hinder that ability to create a genuine connection, not one that has been institutionalised. As the success of student mentoring hinges largely on the quality of the relationship (Garvey and Alred, 2000), it is crucial that Mentors find and adopt a stance that does not impede their relationship with their Mentees.

In Grégoire et al.'s study (2022), Mentors reported uncertainties about the right posture to adopt during mentoring sessions, and having to remind themselves that they were not in a typical client-professional relationship, but a mutual relationship. This can be tricker where there is less of an age difference: for example, second year Mentors who arrived at university as school leavers aged 18 – as the majority of undergraduate students do (OfS, 2023) - will only be one year older than first-year Mentees who were school leavers. It is unsurprising therefore, given this conflicted role, that Mentors are often unsure how to pitch themselves as a leader (Gunn, Lee, and Steed, 2016).

Relational mentoring on underrepresented student mentoring schemes

Many universities utilise mentoring as an intervention to reduce student dropout rates (Gehreke et al, 2024; Nora and Crisp, 2007), particularly among underrepresented or widening participation (WP) student groups. The University of Exeter is one of these examples. Since 2017, the university's Peer Support team has connected underrepresented students with Mentors from similar backgrounds through specialised 'WP' mentoring schemes, targeting groups where continuation gaps were most notable, including students who are mature, care experienced, and estranged, or have a mental health condition or disability (University of Exeter, 2024).

Students from underrepresented backgrounds often face barriers to belonging that extend beyond academic transition. Student groups that do not reflect the 'traditional' student model, such as mature students, can feel like outsiders at university (Tett, 2004; Gregersen and Nielsen, 2022; Marvell and Child, 2023), leading to frustration and isolation when they feel they do not fit a university's expectation of them (Briggs et al., 2012). However, similarity to one's peers fosters belonging (Fernández et al., 2023), which increases students' wellbeing (Yong et al., 2025; WONKHE, 2022), as well as their satisfaction with and academic performance at their institution (Mantzios et al., 2020).

Mentoring schemes designed for WP students aim to provide this sense of similarity and solidarity. As previously outlined, Mentors have navigated similar challenges to their Mentees. These schemes further this by matching Mentees to Mentors who share their characteristics or lived experiences and can offer more targeted guidance. For example (without wanting to homogenise student groups and experiences), a fellow mature student with caring responsibilities can likely understand the barriers experienced by another mature student carer. Targeted mentoring can also address issues such as those underlined by Baker (2020), wherein some WP students are made to feel like they do not 'fit in' at an institution because of their academic and social differences to their peers. WP mentoring schemes can thereby position Mentors as key relational touchpoints for Mentees at their institution, with the human element – or rather, the informal peer element – becoming the main component of the role.

However, relational labour is demanding. In recent years, students across the sector have become more selective about their engagement with non-assessed opportunities (Crabtree, 2023). Many mentoring schemes are voluntary and co-curricular (Andreanoff et al., 2024), thereby falling into this category of opportunities. Mentoring often reaches only a small amount of the students eligible to participate (Emsley-Jones et al., 2024), either because students do not opt in to be assigned a Mentor, or do not attend scheduled PASS or PAL sessions. Even where Mentees have signed up, this does not always equate to active or regular engagement. Mentors frequently encounter Mentees who may be unsure, disengaged, or reluctant to participate in organised activities. Mentors are often left having to 'push' their services to their assigned Mentees, or only receive engagement at pivotal points in the academic year such as when assignments are due (Conboy and Hall, 2012, Millmore et al., 2024).

This is demotivating for Mentors, who often sign up for altruistic reasons and perceive their role as such, particularly on WP schemes. Seery et al. (2021) noted that, when Mentors found their role becoming more pragmatic and less relational than they had hoped, this absence of relationship development with their Mentee caused significant disappointment. Additionally, they found Mentors overestimating the importance of their role for their Mentees reversed the relationship's expected dependency: Mentors needed more from Mentees than Mentees needed from them, further complicating this already fragile power imbalance. Even where Mentors and Mentees do engage initially, if there is a personality mismatch the relationship is likely to fail (Ehrich et al., 2004).

Relational labour is one of the core challenges to successful mentoring, particularly for pastoral schemes which hinge on social connection and congruence, as opposed to academic transition. Attendance, confidence, and engagement, often described as separate issues, can be deeply interrelated. For example: the quality of the

peer 'leader' role and Mentee **confidence** – in the Mentor's ability to understand their lived experience and thereby in the Mentor as a 'safe' person – influences Mentee **engagement**. Andreanoff et al. (2024) noted Mentors with shared lived experience encourage session **attendance and engagement** as they provide a safe and familiar environment. They specifically mention the impact of this for care leavers, who have a lived experience not shared by many. A lack of **confidence** in, and social/cognitive congruence with, one's Mentor can therefore dissuade Mentee **engagement**. As previously stated, lack of Mentee engagement and attendance demotivates Mentors thereby dissuading *their* engagement and impeding their ability to be a confident Mentor. As a result, we can argue that, when combined, these factors impede the ability for Mentors and Mentees to connect **and** represent a symptom of this lack of connection.

Trust, familiarity, and reduced hierarchy are essential conditions for participation with mentoring, particularly for Mentees who may arrive with less confidence in navigating university systems or social environments - which can include, but is not limited to, widening participation students. But if there is no opportunity for these to be formed, it is no surprise that students do not in turn want to participate.

Given these challenges, mentoring frameworks that help Mentors communicate warmth, openness, and commonality, while maintaining their role as the 'expert', may be particularly valuable. Playful leadership offers one such possibility.

Playful leadership: a relational mentoring framework?

What do we mean by 'playful leadership'?

For the context of this article, playful leadership is posited as **a relational stance characterised by a willingness to embrace creativity in social interaction** – rather than as a leader that encourages play.

There is a distinction between 'play' and 'playfulness'. Pellegrini (2018) argues that play is intrinsically motivating: 'if somebody tells you to do it, then it's not intrinsically motivating'. As a result, if you are being *made* to play in the classroom by an authoritative figure such as a teacher, this is not really play. It could be argued therefore that play and leadership do not belong together.

However, Sicart (2014) argues that what differentiates play and playfulness is our psychological, emotional, and physical stance: that play is an *activity* while playfulness is an *attitude*.

What does this attitude look like? Whitton (2022) describes playfulness as:

> 'an attitude of mind that embodies a willingness to engage in activities in a light-hearted, joyful, open, mischievous, and comedic manner' (p.30).

Playful leadership in practical, demonstrable or quantifiable terms may be best summarised by Schrier et al. (2024), who note play has potentially powerful, positive implications for educational leadership through its ability to:

- Provide lower-stress environments where students can integrate knowledge
- Provide safe environments for students to practice skills
- Encourage social learning and connect during transitions to peer communities.

Biddulph and Gilbride summarise playfulness in school leadership through 9 qualities which produce some of the effects outlined by Schier et al, including: reduced hierarchy through 'being one of the group'; confidence; participation; and openness to change (2024, p.161). Such creative approaches, they argue, create a safe, inclusive environment.

This environment can be seen as the 'magic circle', a term first posited by play theorist Huizinga (1955), and later applied by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) to explain how people construct realities and relationships during play. It denotes a (physical or imaginary) play space separate from the real world and mutually constructed by those involved with it. This circle demarcates a space of safety, where real world rules do not necessarily apply, and allows for experimentation with stereotypical rules of behaviour, belief, or interaction (Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton, 2017, p.274).

Linked to Pellegrini's observations, playful leadership is **not** gamification, 'the practice of making activities more like games in order to make them more interesting or enjoyable' (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). As Whitton (2022) writes:

> 'Games can be undertaken seriously, and other activities can be undertaken playfully; consider, for example, a solemn and intense chess match between Grandmasters and yarn bombing (applying playfulness to crochet). While games and playfulness are concepts related through play, they are also distinct from each other.' (p.126)

Such a process removes the focus on increasing enjoyment **through building connections**, which playful leadership can achieve within the magic circle it creates. Additionally, gamification transforms play into a contrived and disingenuous activity as highlighted by Pellegrini. Notably, Whitton's definition of playfulness as an attitude - based on her review of the literature on what constitutes 'playfulness' (2022, p.30) – underlines the spontaneity, willingness, and uninhibitedness of playfulness, and thereby its **authenticity**. Biddulph and

Gilbride reinforce this by noting leaders must be 'serious about play' for the impact of play on children's academic and social outcomes to be explicit (2024, p.162); inauthenticity will break the magic circle and allusion in which playfulness occurs.

Why this for Mentors?

In education, one can lead an activity but not *be* a teacher, a role which requires empathy, creativity, and the ability to engage and change students (Holmes and Schumacker, 2020). Through this lens, a pedagogical leader's attitude and *being* is crucial to how they interact with students. As already highlighted, student Mentors can experience challenges interacting with their students (Mentees). Thereby the attitude of playfulness might have a transformative effect on how pedagogical leaders, such as student Mentors, engage with students.

For peer mentors, especially on WP schemes, the qualities of playful leadership summarised by Schrier et al. (2024) and Biddulph and Gilbride align directly with the relational demands of their role and could almost be copy-and-pasted into a Mentor role descriptor. Such overlap illustrates the potential for playfulness as a mechanism for building connections with likeminded and similarly experienced peers in the way Mentors are expected to.

Playful leadership also offers a way to help Mentors balance approachability with responsibility, authority with informality, and familiarity with professional boundaries. Schrier et al. (2024) describe play as a democratic and community-based approach to leadership. These themes of democracy and community are echoed in Nørgård's (2021) three playframes for a playful university: curiosity, creativity, and communality. Through this emphasis on communality, fellowships and communities are formed that shift higher education from 'individual performance to co-operative collaboratorium', while adopting a lusory attitude means that we 'are always among fellow-players' (p.151). Furthermore, the characteristics of play tend to make environments less formalised (Sicart, 2014, p.28). Taken together, these qualities suggest that playful leadership can signal approachability and soften interpersonal hierarchies. For Mentors—who occupy the dual position of leaders while remaining part of the same student community as their Mentees—such an approach may help negotiate the balance between authority and peerhood.

Potential pitfalls to a playful leadership approach in mentoring

Playfulness could be seen to trivialise the important. On pastoral schemes in particular, some Mentees may look to Mentors for guidance on very real, severe issues around adjusting to university and mental health; being met with playfulness may therefore at best seem out of place and at worst insulting. Care should be

taken therefore to place and use playfulness within context and purpose. In this case, the purpose of playful leadership is as part of generating a circle, characterised by different norms and codes of practice that form a safe space. It does not contravene Mentors' responsibilities, particularly around safeguarding and offering appropriate support.

Another potential pitfall is Mentors themselves seeing play and playful leadership as a waste of time. Rising costs and competitiveness around graduate outcomes are increasing learners' pressure to perform, and rendering their time a premium (Whitton, 2018). Although often altruistically motivated, many Mentors sign up to develop or gain tangible, takeaway benefits including academic, networking, and employability skills (Emsley-Jones et al., 2024). Spending time seemingly 'playing' in a non-mandatory mentoring setting may therefore be seen as a waste of their university fees and effort as a Mentor, particularly if they harbour their own interpretations and views of 'play'. As one matures, play - which is associated largely with childhood - can be increasingly viewed as a leisure activity and distinct from the serious business of adulthood (Whitton, 2022, p.49), and regressive (Solnit, 1998, p.108). Mentors and Mentees may therefore feel playfulness has no place in their time and outcome-constrained education settings.

However, students are willing to engage with play in HE when its pedagogic rationale is clear (Whitton, 2022). In this instance:

> **Playful mentoring supports belonging → belonging supports social, emotional, and cognitive development → balanced development supports academic success**

Educational practices that promote community, playfulness, and social connection foster the human development that ultimately leads to the academic success institutions and students seek. Sergiovanni (1998) defines pedagogical leadership through its emphasis on human development and community building, enabling teachers and students to become inquisitive, compassionate, and focused communities. He argues that this focus on what he terms 'human capital development' provides the conditions necessary to improve levels of student learning and development. Such investment may therefore represent a more effective pedagogical approach than an exclusive focus on quantifiable measures such as examination statistics.

Research on play reinforces this perspective. Ginsburg et al. (2007) emphasise that play supports social, emotional, *and* cognitive development—dimensions that all underpin meaningful learning. However, they express concern that the first two are often marginalised within 'increasingly hurried and pressured', performance-driven educational environments, with other forces enhancing children's ability to learn elevated

at their expense (p.182). Although their work focuses on children, similar dynamics are evident in HE, where students' transition and success are equally as rooted in social development as well as academic (Thompson et al., 2021; Briggs et al., 2012; Cage et al., 2021). Yet the sector's increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes risks overlooking these developmental processes. Playfulness may therefore offer a way to counterbalance this performance-oriented culture by foregrounding social connection and human development in mentoring, an area in universities deliberately intended to focus on social connections.

A growing sense of belonging is known to positively influence students' satisfaction and academic performance, the measurable outcomes institutions prioritise. Playful approaches may help foster this belonging by encouraging social interaction; evidence suggests that playful individuals are more likely to seek companionship through social leisure (Qian and Yarnal, 2011), highlighting the potential of playful approaches to encourage connection among students. Explaining this rationale may therefore help address some Mentors' hesitations around playful approaches.

To summarise, playfulness may make initial Mentor-Mentee interactions feel less formal, reduce pressure on Mentors and Mentees, and create shared moments that help establish rapport quickly – elements key to both the success of mentoring and in enriching students' experiences.

Turning Mentors into playful leaders: our 'facilitating playful learning' Mentor training

My own engagement with playful leadership emerged through participation in InnoPlay, a course that *immerses* as much as teaches educators how play removes barriers and enhances learner engagement (InnoPlay, 2025). Born in part from course co-lead Koeners' research into playful learning and teaching in HE, it embodied the question posed in his previous work (Koeners & Francis, 2020, p.144): could play 'teach us how to improve student experience, satisfaction and well-being'?

Experiencing playful facilitation reshaped my own assumptions about how leaders can use play not to entertain but to connect, as the literature outlines. It made me ask a slightly different question to that posed by Koeners and Francis: could play help **Mentors** improve student experience, satisfaction and well-being? These questions, my research into playful leadership, and the insights gained from InnoPlay informed the design of a pilot mentoring workshop for some of our Peer Mentors at the University of Exeter.

The workshop was offered in Autumn 2023 to all Mentors (~90) on the WP schemes offered by the central Peer Support team at that time:

1. Disabled Student Peer Mentoring
2. Mature Student Peer Mentoring

3. Care Leaver and Estranged Student Peer Mentoring

These **pastoral** schemes are offered to undergraduate students from all disciplines who identify with those characteristics. Mentees are matched with a Mentor by staff on our team according, as far as possible, to their preferred criteria and information they provide on their matching form. The schemes were selected for this pilot due to their particular challenges with Mentee engagement. Mentors on them have increasingly experienced the issues highlighted by Seery et al. (2021) of disappointment that their altruistic aims were undelivered due to lack of Mentee engagement, noted in scheme evaluation and Mentor feedback. Mentees opt into these voluntary schemes and how often and by what format they and Mentors communicate is agreed between them to suit everyone's needs. However, this makes the relationship dependent on Mentees *wanting* contact with Mentors, either because they have formed a bond or need something. Furthermore, Mentees consistently outnumber Mentors on all 3 schemes: for example, the Disabled Student Peer Mentoring scheme recruited 57 Mentors and 204 Mentees in 2022/23, and 71 Mentors and 194 Mentees in 2023/24 (Norman et al., 2024). This puts increased pressure on correctly matching Mentors and Mentees by their preferred matching criteria, which includes any conditions they have, their life experiences, discipline, and campus. Although Mentees and Mentors can express preferences on which criteria are prioritised, 71 Mentors cannot possibly match all or some of the criteria identified by 194 Mentees with very individual needs. While expectations are managed, there are always Mentees who drop out because they did not get the type of Mentor they wanted, or they experience the personality mismatch that prevents a connection forming (Ehrich et al., 2004).

The workshop's intended purpose was to explore whether, as hypothesized, playful leadership principles could help these Mentors build stronger relationships with their Mentees and feel more confident in their leadership role. On these schemes, the Mentors make first contact with Mentees and are responsible for driving the first meet-up and subsequent communications; how they approach this therefore impacts how the relationship is formed.

To achieve this, the workshop was structured around the **foundations of playful leadership** – demonstrating playful leadership in practice through delivery of the session with:

1. Experiential playful activities – enabling Mentors to experience relational play first-hand.

2. Application to mentoring practice – supporting Mentors in adapting playful stances to suit their mentoring style and designing a playful session to use with their Mentees.

These activities were intended as 'play signifiers': things that represent play and indicate that participants are in a situation where the normal rules of engagement with others need not apply (Whitton, 2022, p. 102). They acted as what Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton (2017) term 'the surface structure' of their model for playful learning in higher education, easing both Mentees' entry into play – noting they may experience the varied opinions of play and thereby wariness to engage experienced by Mentors – and giving Mentors operational methods of creating an accessible, playful environment. Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton's model was chosen for its congruence with the theory, aims and challenges underpinning this article and our mentoring schemes. The model was based on their research, including their study into reasons students disengage with learning opportunities. This study highlighted many of the factors that influence our Mentees' decisions on whether to participate in mentoring, including perceived value of the experience and peer influence (p.276).

Table 2
Overview of workshop components and intended learning outcomes

Activity name	How it runs	**Purpose**
Soft start introduction	Mentors were greeted at the door, asked to take a name label and add two topics they were happy for people to 'ask you about' (e.g. hobbies, studies). Various game stations were distributed around the room to allow Mentors to begin a game and for latecomers to join in intermittently.	**To illustrate how to ease tension of Mentees entering a space knowing no one else** and **establish the physically safe space needed for playful mentoring** by allowing them to drift to whichever activity they trusted. It also allowed them **to enter a state of willingness to play**, highlighted by Whitton (2022). Name labels provided conversation starters with strangers, and allowed for Mentors to learn and remember names, without the pressure of having misheard a name or forgotten it. This tackled the

		engagement barrier of peer influence and feeling embarrassed or shy (Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton, 2017), particularly where Mentors arrived later than others. Joining a game already underway, or starting one elsewhere in the room, gave Mentors an entry point to begin interacting with one another, for example through focusing on a game, which later digressed into conversations linked to topics on their label.
Intended learning outcomes and agenda	Information introduced and displayed on a slide	**To set expectations and contextualise in playful theory and mentoring expectations**, as all were first-time Mentors. Whitton lists explaining why play is being used and is pedagogically appropriate as a technique for helping educators recognise player diversity and design accessible playful activities (2022, p.175). My explanation demonstrated to Mentors how my icebreaker games and activity examples were intended to support them to engage, and that such principles should feed into and inspire their final output and

		activity: creating and leading a playful mentoring activity for their peers. Highlighting this also framed playfulness in a mentoring context to help Mentors avoid taking playfulness out of context with Mentees, a potential pitfall to successful playful leadership.
Icebreaker game stations	I selected 2 games of different styles: 1. Active, group alliterative name game 2. Calm activity in pairs, building representations of themselves, then a doubt they had about mentoring - which their partner then had to build a 'solution' for While not directly associated to being a Mentor, they were activities which could be translated to a mentoring context. For example: they could make the activity about building a doubt a student had about starting university.	**To allow Mentors to experience how completing such activities made them feel as participants.** As Whitton underlines, the play experience varies enormously depending on our experiences. Consequently, we tend to draw on our experiences when designing games and activities for others (2022, p.160), but there are lots of ways to play and choice should be embedded into activity design (p.174). By offering a variety of activities, I wanted Mentors to experience: - how different activity types change the mood of the room, - and the discomfort one might feel in an activity that differs from their experiences and preferences This would help them consider such elements when planning their own mentoring, both from an accessibility perspective and in

		building connections with individuals different to them.
Mentoring activity example	I utilised a reference 'treasure hunt' activity I had produced for all Mentors, which was available for them to download from central training resources and use with Mentees. It was a digital activity which could be completed in-person or online, as some Mentors had online-only Mentees.	**To pivot today's experience as playful learning participants towards their context (mentoring) and illustrate how they might playfully lead activities relevant to mentoring**. As before, Mentors experienced how a different type of activity made them feel – e.g. did it make them uncomfortable / put them outside of their comfort zone? – to understand how Mentees might experience playful mentoring, including the challenges for both the leader and participants. By choosing activities that could be utilised in a mentoring context, Mentors also gained inspiration for the final activity.
Planning and leading an activity	Mentors were given time to design – either individually or in groups – a 10-minute playful mentoring activity	**To allow Mentors to put playful leadership into practice in a safe space and receive feedback.** Mentors were able to successfully practise implementing the theories covered by today's session into activity design. Whitton highlighted that creating and modifying games themselves provides learners (in this case, the Mentors) another way to participate in playful experiences, improving engagement (2022,

		p.175). Time constraints did not allow for all activities to be delivered, which I would address if repeating the training. Mentors did get to discuss how difficult it was to implement some of the accessibility elements they had highlighted as essential from their own participation, and begin to consider how they might cater for these in their mentoring.
Closing thoughts	Two questions posed for discussion on a PowerPoint slide: 1. Which elements of this session would be useful for other Mentors? Which would you include if running this session? 2. Which elements will be useful when leading sessions with Mentees?	To conclude, summarise, and receive feedback for myself on how I had led the session. Mentors' feedback clarified: • how I could improve playful leadership resources for other Mentors who had not attended the session, • and the challenges they had faced as participants and leaders, which could be fed forward into future activities of this nature and their own mentoring.

The emphasis throughout was not just on providing Mentors with activities to 'use', but rather on modelling a stance of playful openness through the platform of these activities as the most accessible stage of Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton's model. These activities were chosen for their ability to:

- quickly establish rapport with each other and with myself as a 'playful leader', removing hierarchies and creating the democratic, safe spaces outlined by Schrier et al. (2024) and Biddulph and Gilbride (2024)
- help Mentors notice qualities of playful leadership as they experienced them so they could emulate and repeat these in future with Mentees
- allow Mentors to apply and practice theoretical ideas on playful mentoring with other Mentors and discover what worked for them, recognising both the need to find their own style and that blending of theory and practice as an essential part of educator education (Dalgarno et al., 2016).

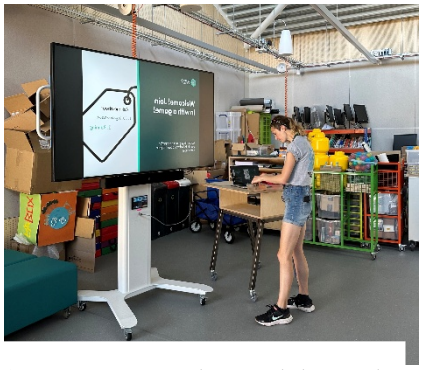

Figure 1: Session being delivered in the Creative Quadrant, a building on campus which Mentors could later choose to book and use to implement playful leadership

Mentors responded positively to the experiential nature of the session, noting that playful facilitation made them feel more relaxed and connected as hypothesized. They particularly noted the importance of the training taking place in person, and how this helped reinforce the social connections forged. Several reported feeling more confident about approaching their Mentees afterwards, suggesting that experiencing playfulness helped them recognise its value in a mentoring context. These observations resonated with the existing literature on play that had inspired this session.

Challenges

Despite its promise, the pilot revealed important challenges. Some Mentors initially felt unsure about the purpose of playful activities, as expected given the unconventionality of play in HE However, explaining the theory helped them abandon the wariness about play as merely a leisure activity as Whitton outlined.

The activities were intended as a mechanism for demonstrating practical ways of leading mentorship playfully, as had been done on InnoPlay, given how hard it can be to define playfulness and what being a playful leader looks like on an individual basis. While the Mentors became more engaged and confident, the sessions they designed for their Mentees illustrated that their main takeaway was a focus on the activities used, not the way they were delivered and the atmosphere created by small, playful and relational gestures such as gentle invitations to participate, 'Ask me about' name labels and shared laughter. When discussing and explaining their activity designs at the end, their focus was on the artifacts they would use, not the effect these would have on Mentees. This could have been a fault in how I explained the expected outcomes for the activity; I was deliberately implicit about their explaining the 'why' behind their selections, noting that a playful attitude must be genuine and intrinsic. This emphasised the need for me to frame playful leadership more clearly from the outset and explicitly differentiate it from gamification, demonstrating using perhaps the playful qualities outlined by Biddulph and Gilbride (2024). These are character traits exhibited by most Mentors who are

expected to be – and are by the altruistic nature of these schemes – approachable and supportive. The focus could therefore have been on how the implicit lusory structures they possess (these values, habits, ethics) have the strongest presence while the surface structures (activities) have the weakest (Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton, 2017, p.278).

Time constraints limited opportunities for debriefs and reflection, which are essential elements supporting entry to and exit from a magic circle of learning (Jones, 1998; Whitton, 2022). Naturally, a single workshop can introduce concepts but cannot fully develop a new leadership stance. The InnoPlay course allows 3 days. While this would not be feasible with Mentors, this kind of training could perhaps be offered as a course or block with several sessions over several weeks or months showing progression through Nørgård, Nielsen, and Whitton's model from surface level activities to implicit lusory structures (2017). As this had in fact been my goal, the pilot did serve to justify that ambition, and would have provided time to embed the difference highlighted in my previous paragraph between surface structures and values.

Despite the offer being available to all WP Mentors, only 5 attended. This was due to multiple factors, including:

- this workshop being an additional activity on top of Mentors' mandatory training, which is unpaid and takes 1-2 hours over the summer break for Mentors who, as previously explored, may already be time-poor;
- logistical constraints based on the time of year. The workshop had to take place after mandatory training - as it assumed Mentors' understanding of the role and responsibilities – but before Mentors and Mentees were matched in mid-September. This meant the workshop could only be offered in early September, when not all students were back on campus;
- and a general lack of Mentor engagement in any activities offered outside of their mandatory training - these are typical attendance figures for non-mandatory activities for Mentors on these schemes.

This reduced the overall cohort impact, as can be common of training and development programmes. I chose to make this session optional, given it was a pilot and acknowledging that not all Mentors will want to emulate a playful leadership style; however, perhaps in future this could be a section of the mandatory training to pique interest and widen engagement. Nevertheless, when asked subsequently if they would be happy to lead a future session on playful leadership to other Mentors, several did express interest and one later became a Mentor leader on their scheme and carried through some of the values from this training. Although this is only a small cohort size on which to base conclusions, this does suggest a train-the-trainer model may be feasible – and may be more effective, as it removes the power imbalance I represent as a staff member.

These challenges emphasise that playful leadership requires ongoing practice, clear framing, and structured opportunities for reflection if it is to meaningfully influence mentoring relationships.

Lessons learned

Several insights emerged from the pilot through informal observations and conversations with participants:

1. Playfulness can effectively foster learner connections

Mentors participating reported that playful activities helped them relax and feel more comfortable with one another. This relational ease is likely to translate into more confident and approachable interactions with Mentees, which was later confirmed by the Mentors who did trial a playful leadership approach with Mentees and reported its positive effect in connecting their group.

2. Clear framing is essential

Distinguishing playful leadership from gamification could have prevented misconceptions and helped Mentors focus on relational qualities rather than activities to deploy. Playfulness offers a safe space (magic circle) which values connections and open-mindedness which other forms of collaborative active engagement may not offer so readily.

3. Sustainable change requires ongoing support

A train-the-trainer model or regular reflective spaces may help embed playful leadership more deeply within mentoring structures.

One notable outcome was the relational ease it helped me forge as a playful leader with these Mentors, who all subsequently fed back that the session had removed the social barriers experienced with me as a staff member, increasing their confidence and connection with me. The session increased their own engagement with the scheme as Mentors, with them all attending mentoring events and activities which they may not otherwise have done. Such examples illustrate the potential impact of a relational playful leadership approach.

While due to logistical constraints I was unable to offer this training again, I did have the opportunity to support a Mentor in leading a playful session with other Mentors at an event. This allowed me to informally put some of these lessons into practice. In line with expectations, focusing on framing the intention behind the students' proposed activities rather than the activities themselves helped them achieve the desired space and impact on students.

Conclusions and recommendations

Student peer mentors occupy a complex and often ambiguous leadership position—simultaneously peers, guides, and often facilitators of structured learning, but without the power of full institutional backing that a staff member would possess. Without clear support, Mentors can struggle to navigate this dual role, and this uncertainty can hinder the development of the authentic, trusting relationships that make mentoring effective. The exploratory pilot described in this article suggests that playful leadership may offer a valuable framework for addressing these challenges, particularly in widening participation schemes, where belonging and personalised connection are key.

Importantly, playful leadership is not gamification nor an add-on activity; it is a stance grounded in trust, curiosity, and relational warmth. Embedding such a stance requires ongoing training, opportunities for reflection, and careful framing within mentoring programmes.

The findings remain preliminary and based on a small cohort. More systematic research—with larger groups and clearer measures of impact—is required to determine the extent to which playful leadership can be embedded effectively within peer mentoring practice.

Sheryl Sandberg asserted that leadership 'is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence' (2015). By modelling openness, reducing perceived hierarchy, and fostering quick, low-stakes connection as playful leaders, Mentors potentially increase their ability to have that impact on others.

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