University of HUDDERSFIELD
University of Huddersfield Press

Journal of Play in Adulthood
Available open access at: www.journalofplayinadulthood.org.uk

Journal of Play in Adulthood

Developing playful leaders through taking a playful approach to leadership development

Susannah Quinsee

City St George's, University of London, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, UK

KEYWORDS

Leadership development

Playful practice

Playful leader

Higher education

ABSTRACT

This article explores how playful techniques have been used in the delivery of a Masters level module on leadership development. Using playful practices in this leadership module has two main aims; firstly the use of playful practices to deliver leadership education effectively and secondly, how these in turn can be used to develop playful leaders. This dual lens looks at how the development of various leadership skills and characteristics can be enhanced and developed using playful practices and then uses more recently developed models that define playful leadership as a theoretical framework for the design of this module. The article considers how playful approaches can both support developing leaders in higher education as well as considering how the development of playfulness is in itself as a vital facet of leadership practice. This leads to a consideration of the playful techniques and practices used in the module as supporting ambition to develop playful leadership practice. Whilst playful techniques have been introduced into the module organically to support engagement, the article explores how these can be seen to act as a structure for developing both leaders and playful leaders. The impact of these practices on the participants on the module is also considered as a means of evaluating the success of this approach, although more work is needed to be done here.

Introduction

Leadership theory is a huge area and one where the literature can often seem rather dry, disengaging and dictatorial.[*] There is also a sense that some of the leadership assumptions and beliefs articulated in much of the literature are not fit for purpose in the current world, leading to the notion of "zombie leadership" (Haslam *et al* 2024). Despite a growing field considering academic leadership, the vast majority of leadership literature and

[*] This blog outlines the interest in leadership books and why they are so popular - https://serveleadnow.com/why-are-there-so-many-leadership-books/ - a quick search on Amazon shows there are at least as many leadership books listed as cookery.

Published under Creative Commons License 4.0

theory has been developed in the commercial sector (Anthony and Antony, 2017). It is often qualified by implying a particular relationship between leader and "follower" (for example Lewin's influential of leadership (1939)). This is not always applicable to the field of higher education where institutional loyalty is looser and there is a distrust of hierarchies and management (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008). Frequently, those occupying leadership positions in UK higher education are there on a temporary basis and do not always regard their promotion to a leadership position as one that imbues power and influence (Rayner *et al* , 2010, Macfarlane, 2011). Or they may be in leadership positions that are illusory in their nature; they have the nomenclature of leadership ("module leader", "programme leader" and so on) yet the levers that the person occupying that role has to enact change can be limited. They have the responsibility to uphold institutional and increasingly regulatory standards and often little ability to ensure that their "followers" or those fellow academics they are attempting to lead actually follow their lead.

Over the past ten to fifteen years, considerable work has taken place in UK higher education to develop leadership capacity in institutions (Lennoxsmith and Foster, 2025). Realising that higher education leadership is a tricky or "strange place" (Bryman and Lilley, 2009), yet one that would benefit from developing leaders that can enable higher education to adapt and meet new challenges, more research and support has been given to developing leadership in UK universities. This capacity is sorely needed (Kennie and Middlehurst, 2021), particularly at the current time when the general mood is that UK higher education is in crisis (Bolden, 2024).

The growing field of research into academic leadership generally supports the view that distributed leadership is the dominant model of leadership in higher education settings (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey and Ryland, 2012) and thus one that raises its own complications when attempting to lead in this model. Considerations of how to support leadership development in universities frequently cite the complexities of the challenge, the multiplicity of responses, the urgency to support and develop leaders and the myriad of skills that leaders need (Stefani, 2015, Parkin, 2022, Wareing, 2023). Albone (2024) and Bolden (2024) both point to the overwhelming numbers of theories and practices that impact on the debate about what it means to be a leader in higher education.

For aspiring leaders in higher education this can feel an overwhelming and intimidating arena to enter. Where does one start when attempting to make sense of how to lead in higher education? And how can we reconceptualise leadership that is more inclusive and relevant to counter claims of *zombie* leadership? Couple this with an unhealthy dose of imposter syndrome and middle leaders in academia can feel disempowered at the start of their leadership journey (Rickett and Thompson, 2024).

Playfulness as a positive response

One way to approach this need for credible academic leaders who are leading in complex environments is to connect with play and playfulness. The value of using playful approaches in higher education has been growing in recent years (Lubbers et al, 2023). Nørgård and Whitton (2025) argue that incorporating playfulness into universities is an integral part of higher education culture and one that is needed to build the learning communities and creative practices that universities need to survive. Nørgård and Whitton's (2025) principles for a playful university implicitly relate to leadership in the way they position universities as "failure labs" where playful leaders support play as a way of learning through failure, experimentation and "ungoverns" (p.302). James and Nerantzi (2019) in their case for the playful university makes a similar point which is more directly related to leadership in that "play makes us better at the complex, challenging, horizon-stretching work that a university needs to do" (p.18). Notions are play are attractive here as "play" is regarded as an activity that enables freedom of expression, social connection, meaning and fun (Huizinga, 1949, Rosen, 2019, Whitton & Moseley, 2019). Play is something that is absorbing and encompassing in the moment, connecting with Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow which is "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (1990, p. 4). These are important attributes for supporting leaders navigating challenge.

However, it is "playfulness" that is the focus of this article as it denotes a "temperamental dispositional trait" (Hart and Holmes, 2022). Playfulness can support meaning making and positive experiences for adults (Lubbers *et al* ,2023). This is important when approaching leadership development. Playfulness, as defined by Proyer (2017) is "an individual differences variable that allows people to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining" and "is associated with a preference for complexity rather than simplicity and a preference for […] unusual activities, objects, topics and individuals.

Thinking about organisations more generally, which is significant in relation to the notion of developing leaders, playful leadership behaviours can support the breaking down of barriers in organisations, promote authenticity and belonging and particularly support female leaders (Zhang *et al*, 2025, Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006, Tökkäri, 2015). If the case for using playfulness in organisations and higher education is arguably growing stronger, what about playful leadership? Most significantly, Seybert (2014) found that educational leaders who engaged in playfulness had a better sense of wellbeing and balance beyond their professional lives. Küpers (2017) eloquently makes a case for "serious play" being "linked to practical wisdom and professional artistry. The notion of artistry here in relation to leadership practice is a useful one as one can think of leadership development in terms of one crafting one's leadership practice and skills. Kark (2011) argues "the ability to play is crucial for today's

leadership and management, since it can enhance leader's ability to be creative and promote ongoing innovation and organisational change" (p.517). Similarly others have argued specifically for the value of games in leadership development and management education (Schrier *et al*, 2023, Nelson and Padilla, 2022, Hill and Cebulski, 2022, Kark, 2011). Hruška, Szarucki and Marić (2025) regard playful approaches as fundamental in shaping "leader and follower identities, foster[ing] cognitive flexibility, flexibility, creativity, and adaptability".

Proyer (2017) identifies four key facets of playfulness other-directed, lighthearted, intellectual and whimsical. What a playful leader does goes hand in hand with notions of what playfulness is. Encouraging this mindset through the creation of playful opportunities then enable participants to think freely and experiment (Quinsee and Parker, 2024). Such opportunities for playful practice are significant for leadership development as they can enable participants to strengthen their individual development "while at the same dime enabling connection and co-creation" (Abegglen *et* al 2021).

Developing Future Leaders module as a response to overwhelm

The Developing Futures Leaders module has been designed to provide hope and support for developing leaders in challenging times. It has a dual purpose, firstly to deliver an engaging and effective development programme for aspiring leaders and secondly, to enable the development of playful leadership behaviours themselves. These are arguably vital leadership skills to equip leaders in higher education with the techniques and self-awareness needed to thrive in a BANI world, which is defined as one that is brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible (Kruse, 2025).There is an additional facet to this in that these two inter-related aims go hand-in-hand: creating the conditions in which to effectively use playful techniques in the development programme engenders similar parallel behaviours that are the hallmarks of playful leadership. Or in other words the impact

A 30 credit module, it can be taken as a standalone module or a part of the full Masters in Academic Practice qualification. A number of attendees on the module are in those tricky middle leadership positions, for example as module leaders or equivalent, whereby they have responsibility for delivering education at a particular standard but not often the normal levers to enact change, having to rely on persuasion and influence.. Participants are both academic and professional services staff and some attendees come from outside the organisation, either from other universities or, with increasing numbers, from the NHS..

The module is founded on a core set of principles around leadership practice and development, which are as follows:

- Everyone is a leader. This counters the "trait" theory approach that leaders are born and not made. Instead, in the module, a range of leadership approaches are explored to challenge traditional assumptions and models of leadership supporting a more inclusive approach.
- Leadership is a collaborative activity. Leaders cannot and do not operate within a vacuum. You cannot be a leader without followers and leadership is naturally a collaborative activity.
- Leaders are not fixed and leadership identities can, do and even should change. One can occupy shifting roles, we are not "always" acting in a leadership role however we might have still be exercising leadership skills.
- Leaders are always learning. Fostering a growth mindset approach (Dweck, 2006) and approaching situations with natural curiosity, openness and an understanding that taking risks and "failing" is part of learning are vital to the approach to leadership development supported here.
- Leadership development and identity comes from an understanding of one's personal growth and development. By understanding oneself, one can then better understand and support others.
- Learning as a co-creation. My role as module leader is as a guide, co-creator and facilitator. Each learning activity is approached with a collaborative mindset within the framework set.
- Leader as coach. A coaching approach, where that is non-directive, non judgemental and regarding the participants with unconditional positive intent is fostered throughout the module both through the learning environment and approaches taken.

These principles were determined as a framework for the module as a response to the huge amount of literature and theories around leadership in all contexts. They are influenced by Kouzes and Posner's (1995, 2017) five practices of exemplary leadership: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enabling others to act, encourage the heart. The module is designed to start with the participants' personal views and perceptions of leadership in order to situate themselves within their context and the theories available. It then moves to their interactions with others; so how to work and influence others in teams or as a nominal leader where the notion of "team" (for example "module team") may be more fluid and less hierarchical. Finally the module then looks at those aspects beyond the personal and relationships which impact on leadership practice; so leadership in organisations, organisational culture, change and power. This radial approach enables participants to understand themselves, then understand how that self-awareness impacts on their relations with others, then on the environment around them.

This structure for the module fits with Kark's (2011) model for leadership development. Kark (2011) defines leadership development as "building and using interpersonal competence" (p.509). They distinguish between leader development and leadership development where one relates to individual competency development and one is relational. As noted above, the model for the module covers both of these and adds in the situational element too in relation to the environment. Kark terms this latter situational element as "collective endorsement".

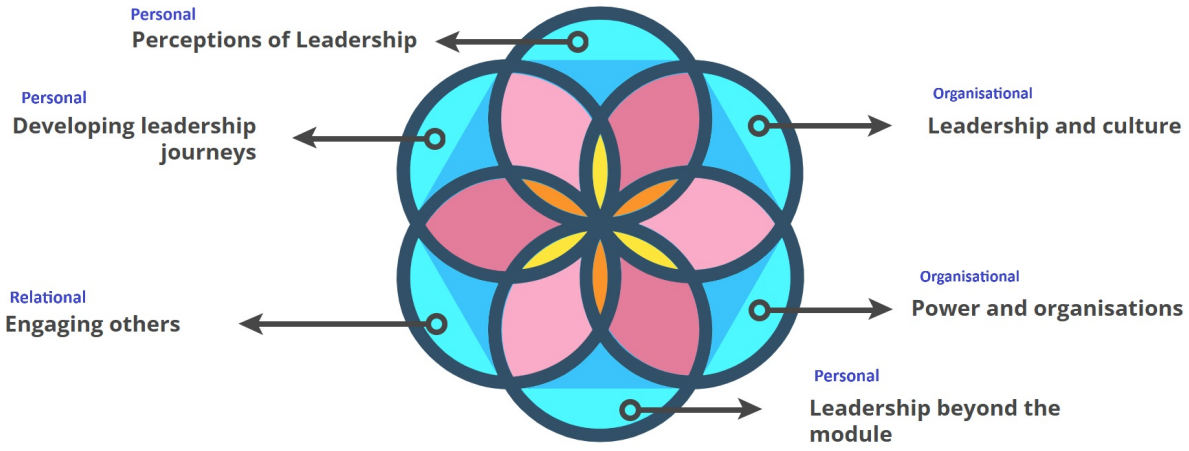

Figure 1: Structure of the module linked to the three aspects of leadership development: personal, relational and organisational.

The three step model of personal to others to environment has been a useful framework but this is only part of the story. In designing the module, taking an enabling and meaningful approach has been important to ensure that participants are fully engaged and the activities are useful to them. From the design of each learning activity to the design of the assessments, the mantra "this has to be useful to the participants" has been a key touchpoint. This is where a playful approach has come to the fore. Initially the playful techniques were introduced in a piecemeal fashion over time to support various activities, such as the inclusion of a LEGO® Serious Play® activity, however, now the entire module is scaffolded using a variety of playful approaches.

Playful leadership skills

Thinking back to Proyer's 2017 model above, playful leadership is about the aptitude (or mindset) and ability (or environment and action) to play (Poulson, 2015, Ibarra, 2015, Walsh, 2022) within a leadership setting and from a leadership position. Playful leaders engender a feeling of psychological safety in organisations which is very

powerful if coupled with authenticity (Proyer and Sendatzki, 2025).

Walsh's *Playful Leadership: An introduction and manifesto* (2022) provides a helpful definition of playful leadership as located in action and mindset. For Walsh, it is not about others playing *per se* but about "enabling playfulness to grow in others", similar to Proyer's (2017) model referenced above. A playful leadership approach can also be identified with authenticity as a leader (Ibarra, 2015). Ibarra identifies the adoption of playful practices by leaders as a way of articulating expectations and dealing with discomfort. This resonates with Whitton and Moseley's (2025) call for playful leadership in higher education where they define the hallmarks of playful leadership as vulnerability and humility and being open to possibilities. There are two frameworks, developed from higher education leadership settings, which outline playful leadership principles: Moseley's (2020) seven practices of playful leaders and Walsh's (2022) 12 draft principles of leadership..

Moseley (2020) seven practices of playful leaders are social, dialogical, open, giving agency, goals, feedback loop and engagement/fun. Moseley's framework draws on Freire's approach around community building which recognises that people bring particular experiences into any process and playful situation. This is a helpful lens through which to view the development of playful leaders as it recognises the intrinsic skills, knowledge and values that people bring to their own development. This is significant for the creation of and participant engagement with a playful leadership programme which does not aim to develop "one size fits all" leaders but takes an inclusive approach to leadership development and the creation of individual leadership practices and approaches.

Walsh (2022) 12 draft principles of leadership range from listening, protecting the space to play, psychological safety, disrupting routines, embracing failure, shifting power/encouraging autonomy, focusing on group vision and values, modelling play, providing opportunities to play, promoting social learning and serendipitous encounters, acting as a coach and embracing diversity and divergent thinking.

Both these frameworks build on definitions and approaches to play as inspiring creativity, moving people into a state of flow and thinking differently, linking to the broader concept of play defined earlier. There is an inherent sense of inclusivity and promotion of listening to understand other's perspective. There are considerable overlaps between Moseley's and Walsh's frameworks and the principles for the module, underpinned by Kouzes and Posner's leadership practices, particularly that leadership is an inherently social activity and can only be practiced by engagement with others.

These frameworks can provide a useful lens through which to understand how to engender playful practices in

relation to leadership development. An analysis of the categories demonstrates that they can be grouped into 3 interlined and connected categories that are the hallmark of playful leadership practice: taking a coaching approach; creating safe playful spaces; enabling new possibilities. The table below maps both frameworks and links them to the overall approach taken in the module alongside Kouzes and Posner's exemplary leadership practices.

Table 1
Mapping of playful leadership frameworks

	Module design – 3 aspects of leadership development	Moseley's model	Walsh's model	Kouzes' and Posner's framework
Take a coaching approach:	Personal	Goals Feedback loop	Listen Act as a coach	Encourage the heart – listening and coaching approach.
Create safe playful spaces.	Relational	Social Dialogical	Protect space to play Psychological safety Provide opportunities for play Promote learning and serendipitous encounters Model play	Enabling others to act -creating safe spaces, psychological safety, teams and visions and values Model the way
Enable new possibilities	Organisational	Giving agency Engagement/fun	Shift power, encourage autonomy Focus on groups values and visions. Disrupt routines. Embrace failure. Embrace diversity and divergent thinking	Challenge the process – divergent thinking, disrupt routines, diversity Inspired a shared vision –

It should be noted that this is framework is an initial, exploratory mapping and this model needs further testing and refinement in terms of development. However, mapping the playful leadership frameworks into a leadership development model is the start of providing a framework for the development of playful leadership practice that both supports the definition of a playful leader as one who creates opportunities to play and exhibits a playful mindset. Linking this to a framework for leadership development situates playful leadership in a

broader field of leadership development and provides a structure and credibility for the role of the playful leader as well as providing more of a pragmatic way in which this could be developed.

Now we have a framework for playful leadership development, we can explore which activities contribute to the development of the different playful leadership practices from the module.

Playful leadership development in practice

The module is designed to build individual leadership skills, relational leadership practices and understand leadership in context, looking at organisations and power. It is taught over six months, one day per month with broadly two days allocated to each of the three areas, although obviously each aspect is interrelated and overlaps with the other. Each day has a particular playful focus and activity to engage the participants with the leadership theories and approach being taught. These are each considered in turn, with a consideration of how they meet the three facets of the leadership framework explored above which brings together Walsh's and Moseley's models with Kouzes and Posner's leadership framework.

Building personal playful leadership practice

Day 1: Icebreaking and Daemons

The first day of the module is important in terms of building the foundations of trust and psychological safety for the participants. Cable (2019) views icebreakers as giving permission to play and building trust. In the module, participants are invited to take part in a speed "dating" icebreaker where they need to find answers to a range of questions, some relating directly to the content of the module (for example, name a leader who inspires you), some relating to their emotions around the module (what are you looking forward to on this module) and some more general (name a film or book you have recently read, how did you travel here today?). Participants can engage at a level that suits them and they are able to connect with the other participants in a social and relaxed manner. The informality of the activity and range of questions starts to generate a level of psychological safety, as facilitator, I also engage in the activity too. This activity is then followed by an activity exploring perceptions of leadership where a quiz around statistics of leadership identities is used to generate conversation, looking at how many black women professors there are in the UK, the diversity of FTSE CEOs, the characteristics of university leaders. The objective here is to challenge perceptions of leadership and belonging in a safe way and enable participants to situate themselves in relation to leaders around us. Over lunch, the room is filled with craft materials. When the participants come back from lunch they are greeted by the array of materials available to them, imbuing an element of surprise (Hijkoop, Skovbjerg, Bekker, 2024). They are then asked to use the

materials to construct a leadership "daemon"[†] where they identify their current leadership strengths (or stripes) and their leadership development areas (spots). This activity is inspired from work by Day (2023) on using creative approaches to support engagement and community building with students. The introduction of a range of craft materials takes this into another level of play, both to challenge and disrupt routines as well as to gently take the participants out of their comfort zones. As Holflod (2023), the use of objects enables relationship building with others and deeper meaning making. Activities before this have started to create a safe space and once the participants have built their "daemon" they are asked to share. Common themes are collated in terms of strengths and development areas. The choice of wording is deliberate to avoid "weaknesses" and the use of craft materials provides a lightness to the approach. At the end of the day, the day concludes with a session on Imposter Syndrome, including a bingo game around identifying aspects of imposter syndrome. This draws on the leadership daemons activity whilst also enabling a broader understanding of imposter syndrome.

Day 2: LEGO® Serious Play®

The second day of the module builds on the safe environment created in day one. This is focused on personal leadership journeys and uses LEGO® Serious Play® to scaffold exploration of current leadership practice and what leaders need to support their development. LEGO® Serious Play® "is a thinking, communication and problem-solving approach for topics that are real for the participants" (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 43). This methodology was chosen for the subject of developing leadership practice as it is both reflective and collaborative, as well as connecting to principles around the use of objects to create meaningful experiences and build connection (Holflod (2024), Roos (2006). LEGO® Serious Play® is based on four core principles – everyone builds, everyone shares, everyone reflects, there is no right or wrong answer. Its power lies in the stories and metaphors you, as the builder, create as you own your own story (Roos, Victor, Statler, 2004). The day is carefully scaffolded to ensure that participants are slowly engaged with the activity in a supportive way. The participants are asked to build models relating to a set of questions around their leadership practice. The session begins with a skills building section that enables participants to become familiar with the LEGO® ; this is critical part of the methodology and vital to ensuring inclusive practice. It does not matter whether the participants have used LEGO® before or not, by the end of the skills building activity the objective is that everyone is confident in using LEGO® to build models and make meaning. This enables participants to get over any potentially negative connotations about using play in professional settings. Each participant can choose to interpret the questions as they wish and as they tell the story of their model, other participants can ask questions and explore their story.

[†] The concept of a "daemon" is taken from the concept developed by Phillip Pullman's in *His Dark Materials* (1997-200) and *The Book of Dust* (2017-2025) trilogies which is an animal that manifests your inner spirit.

As the participants build the models, each question requires deeper exploration and there is frequently a palatable shift in attention as participants exhibit characteristics of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, Zenk, Primus and Sonnenburg, 2022). As the number of participants on the module has grown, it has become necessary to develop the exercise. At the last iteration, two groups were run at different times for the initial stages of the activity whereby individual models were built. This smaller and more intimate environment increased the sense of psychological safety and trust as it enabled a smaller group environment. One of the most powerful techniques in the LEGO® Serious Play® method is the building of a shared model. In this case this is a shared model of a supportive leader. All the participants are brought back together to create a shared model of a supportive leader which enables exploration of how leadership operates in connection with others and a common appreciation of leadership development.

Using the LEGO® Serious Play® method for the second day of the module has two main benefits. Firstly it enables participants to create new connections and meanings as well as perceptions around their leadership practice, for example they start to explore their leadership in relation to others and the environment around them. Participants engage with their models and share their reflections at different levels. Secondly, it enables participants to understand other's perceptions of leadership, where there are synergies and differences. As Sońta; (2023) has observed, using LEGO® Serious Play® encourages self-reflection and the use of stories facilitates the creation of shared visions. Using LEGO® Serious Play® in this way enabled participants to engage more deeply with their leadership practice and uncover hidden connections with the wider environment.

These initial two days enable participants to explore their personal leadership practice, perceptions of leadership and start to occupy a coaching approach to their practice through non judgmental and non directive listening and engaging. They are asked to reflect on their own practice in a coaching style lens through the creation of daemons and the LEGO® models. The second day starts to draw their attention to leadership as a collaborative activity through the creation of a shared model and exploring how leadership connects with others. This is then drawn out more fully in the next two days of the module.

Moving from the Personal to the Relational

Day 3: Followership escape rooms

The focus on the third day is moving from individual, personal values around leadership to your relational leadership skills with others (Kark, 2011). This is marked by exploring the literature on followership, which can often be a problematic or challenging concept, not least because of the frequency of literature on followership falling into rather stereotypical or pejorative categorisations of followers. To address this, taking a playful

approach seemed an effective way of tackling these challenges by bringing in new perspectives and encouraging participants to sit with the discomfort. Using the mechanics of an escape room was seen as an effective way of engaging participants. This activity was initially introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic when the module was running entirely online. Taking an online Escape Room approach, participants were organised into groups and had to solve a range of tasks or questions to unlock the next "room". This activity received positive feedback and engagement, making a rather dry subject more engaging as well as highlighting some of the challenges of the literature. When the module moved back to in person teaching, a new approach was needed, enter Followership escape room 2.0 with a couple of twists. The first twist was that each group was in effect competing against each other to gain the code to unlock the "prize" in the locked treasure box. The second twist was to bring the followership literature to life by assigning each participant in the group a followership identity which they could not reveal to the other participants. This element of role play brought to life some of the followership categories in a more engaging and humorous manner. Only at the end of the game did each group member reveal which "role" they had been playing. Incorporating this element to the escape room enabled participants to reflect on their leadership styles and ability to convince specific followers. It encouraged reflection on which roles they take, even if not as extreme, as well as which roles they have experienced in others.

The use of the Escape Room and role play adheres to many of the characteristics of playful leadership; encouraging divergent thinking through asking group members to play different roles within the Escape Room task; embracing failure – there can be only one group that wins the "prize" and that may depend on how well team members stick to their followership roles; encouraging shared group vision and values – not only do the groups have to work together, but this also sheds light on the overall group dynamics and the trust relationships that have been built. Participants observe changes in other participants behaviours; shifting power and autonomy -there is a leader, but the rest of the group does not know it, power dynamics are changed. And most importantly it actively models playful techniques that can be utilised by participants in their own practice.

Leadership at an organisational level: relational to organisational

Day 4: Cultural web Treasure Hunt

After considering followership dynamics, the module then moves to thinking about leadership practice in relation to others within the organisation. How our leadership practice is located and situated within a wider context. The first part of this is to look at organisational culture and use tools that enable us to map and assess the organisational culture around us. A model called the Cultural Web (Johnson *et al* ,2017) is used as a way of mapping and understanding organisational culture. This model is chosen as it is a flexible and accessible and can

be extended at different levels. It enables one to map an organisational culture and then understand the "paradigm" or unwritten heart of the culture which enables leaders to think more effectively about which changes are required to change the culture to a desired one.

There are six different facets to map in the Cultural Web model - signs, symbols, stories being the "soft" aspects of culture and the "hard" aspects -governance, control mechanisms and power structures. These all overlap to some degree but this is a comprehensive way to understand what cultural norms are operating in organisations. Many of these clues are visible in the physical structures around us. Therefore, to understand how this activity can work in practice, rather than just talking about the organisational culture of the university, participants are sent on a "treasure" hunt to find as many different aspects of the culture within the physical environment of the university and complete the Cultural Web "Treasure Map". They are also asked to find a set of different aspects and map them on to the map as well as adding their own. Even participants who have been present on campus for a significant amount of time and are very familiar with it gain a new perspective through this activity. By actively engaging with the environment around them they notice the small visible cues that symbolise the culture that is all around us and how that ultimately shapes the way we lead, behave and are led.

The key aspects of playful leadership that are utilised in this activity are shifting power – the participants are in the control; autonomy – although they need to find different aspects of the Cultural Web, they can choose where to place them and need to justify their choice; space to play – both literally and metaphorically as they explore the campus and "play" with the elements around them. The campus is their playground. There is a strong element of serendipity with this, participants get lost, come across new parts of campus, sometimes go and talk to staff and students about their experiences, no model is ever the same. This is reminiscent of the whimsical and lighthearted aspects of Proyer's playfulness framework (2017). By using space that the majority of participants are familiar with, they disrupt their routines and see things in a different light. There is an element of failure if participants do not find all the "treasure" or they get lost, although getting lost is a positive as it tells a lot about the campus in itself. And lastly again working in groups there is a reaffirmation of values and visions as well as modelling playful approaches.

Day 5: Playful power case studies

Whilst perhaps not a traditional playful activity, the use of case based learning to consider organisational power and leadership provides a useful framework for enabling participants to occupy different roles and understand what power as leaders they have. Similarly to followership, looking at leadership power can provoke very different responses in the participants. Some find the idea of exercising power over others a problematic concept,

however, being aware of your own potential power when in a leadership position is an important part of leadership development and one that can determine one's own effectiveness as a leader. With this in mind, an extended case scenario has been designed, based on leadership experiences, to explore different uses of power, based on a theoretical grounding around organisational power (French and Raven, 1959). The case based approach enables various dimensions of power to be addressed as well as shifting identities and roles, asking the participants to take on different personas in considering the case.

This activity also accords with the development of a variety of playful leadership practices – an understanding of power can enable participants to understand how they can shift and utilise their leadership power. The participants work in groups, again promoting space around group vision and values. By creating a case that is relatable, participants learning is promoted through their engagement with the activity. The activity requires trust and the creation of safe spaces and utilisation of a coaching approach to actively listen to other group members and understand their position. Again by introducing the activity, playful activities are modelled.

Bringing it all together: preparing for the future

Day 6: Capstone day: walking and learning

The final day of the module is taken off site. Seen as a capstone day, this day brings together all aspects of the module to provide a day of reflection and thinking to prepare participants for their future leadership practice beyond the module. Originally this day was held earlier in the module, but during Covid when it had to be taken online, it was moved as during the course of the module the opportunity to run the day in person arose as lockdown restrictions were lifted. Participants are taken to the British Museum in London to explore their leadership journey and what they need to sustain them in the future. Initially, participants spent the whole day in the British Museum, designing a walking activity to take the other participants around the museum on a journey between two artefacts, one that represents their current leadership style and one that represents where they are now at the end of the module and into the future. As the module has grown and also due to logistics of navigating the British Museum in the summer crowds and heat, the activity has been redesigned to still deliver the same principles but at a more humane pace. Now participants start the day with an activity in a nearby building to introduce them to the concept of crucibles of leadership (Bennis and Thomas, 2002) which are those critical moments that test and shape your leadership practice. They then go to the British Museum to identify two artefacts; one that identifies a crucible of leadership that they have faced and secondly to identify an artefact that enabled them to overcome it. They then join with one or two other participants to take them on their journey between the two artefacts. Then they return to the first location and undertake a plenary reflection which looks

at their leadership philosophy and how they can use a potentially negative leadership experience to learn and grow as leaders, as well as identify future actions beyond the module. Finding and identifying objects that spark meaning supports communication of participant's leadership identies and future needs (Holflod, 2024).

Going offsite gives participants the permission to truly immerse themselves in reflection and the permission to "play". Whilst walking might not a conventional playful tool, it accords with this approach of playful leadership as it disrupts routines – there is not pressure or ability to go back to campus for a meeting; it takes a coaching approach as you listen and support others share their leadership journey. Power dynamics are shifted as we are "offsite" and not in a traditional classroom environment and the participants are in control. They could go and sit in the café for the entire session if they want to! Walking is also commonly regarded as a safe space- reference – where participants can share without judgment. The activity is designed around serendipity, evoking the whimsy from Proyer's (2017) framework– the participants have no idea what they will find, often finding both objects in the same room after a long journey around the Museum and lastly it protects the space to play. Using the British Museum with its challenging cultural and colonial history also enables diversity and divergent thinking and enables participants to reflect on what leadership means for them as routed in their cultural identity and some of the challenging aspects of the British Museum itself are reflected in the participants narratives about their leadership identity (Quinsee, 2021).

Throughout the module playful approaches are interwoven with leadership literature to support the development of both leaders and playful leaders.

Initial evaluation

Thus far, evaluation of the module through standard module evaluation has been positive, with the module consistently scoring over 4/5 over the past 8 years. Participants have commented positively on various aspects of the playful techniques used. The LEGO® Serious Play® activity was particularly noteworthy, with feedback that it "made this topic more tangible", was "interesting and enlightening" and making a "heavy/complex topic easier to discuss".

More generally, the teaching methods were described as "creative", "interesting", "interactive", "engaging", "accessible", "diverse" which supported making connections between the different facets of the module. Variation in the methods utilised was also positively commented on although without a specific appreciation of what this added. Some participants did struggle with some of the techniques and wanted more specific reference to theory and instructions, particularly around the daemons on day 1.

Some of the feedback commented on the teaching methods as a source of inspiration; "I got some neat ideas for active learning in my own classes from taking this module".

Going back to the three aspects of playful practice that link to the design principles behind this module:

- Taking a coaching approach - personal
- Creating safe playful spaces - relational
- Enabling new possibilities – organisational

There is some initial evidence that participants have valued this.

Taking a coaching approach - personal

This looks at those aspects of playful leadership that support personal development, including listening and coaching. Participants positively noted coaching that was offered in the module and enjoyed engaging with others. "I found it helpful [to take photos] to remind myself of my learnings by reviewing the photos of my creations!"

Creating safe playful spaces – relational

Here, playful leadership is social, connecting with others through the creation of safe spaces and building trust. Participants commented less specifically on this aspect, although they did enjoy the interaction: "It was great to have the opportunity to interact with peers from all different disciplines (many of whom I've now become really good friends with) and to gain their views."

Enabling new possibilities - organisational

This was probably the aspect least specifically commented on, although participants did reference positively activities around the Cultural Web. Although the comments relating specifically to the delivery, around it being diverse, engaging and sense of difference relate to this category in terms of how playful leaders can disrupt and challenge organisational norms.

There are three pieces of feedback, that really stand out that seem to support the principles of playful leadership development:

> I feel like I've learned a lot not just as a educator but as a human as well.
>
> At first I was not sure about this module, because leadership's name scared me, but once I was into the course and reflecting IN and ON my practice, I seen what I was missing before.

> Prior to this, I at times, experienced imposter syndrome, as I kind of 'fell' into some of my current leadership roles and didn't feel 100% prepared to take them on. This module has helped me to now, fully embrace these roles with more confidence and given me clear actions and steps to become a more effective and hopefully inspiring leader.

Future endeavours and conclusion

As noted earlier, the use of playful practices in this module have developed over time. What has been explored here is to map these practices onto a framework around the development of playful leaders to demonstrate a more intentional and structured approach to using playful practice to specifically develop playful leaders. Whilst some initial feedback is positive in terms of the use of playfulness to develop leadership skills more generically, more feedback and evaluation with participants is needed to understand how they responded to the techniques in the module, whether they regard playful practices as both an effective way of developing leadership approaches and then specifically playful leaders and how they have utilised these techniques and developed after the module. The impact of the wider culture and environment that facilitates both playful practices and behaviours also needs further consideration.

This article has demonstrated to a certain extent that playful techniques can be an effective way of developing leadership within a higher education setting. Initial feedback from participants is encouraging around the use of playful techniques to support engagement and leadership belief. However, the feedback sample is limited to participants of the module and has been performed as part of standard module evaluation, rather than a dedicated study exploring the impact of playful techniques specifically on leadership development. What is needed is further specific research around whether these techniques are effective in supporting the development of playful leadership itself and whether participants utilise a playful leadership mindset beyond the module. One possible avenue for further study would be to map the propsed playful leadership framework more explicitly with Proyer's (2017) model to explore which aspects resonate with participants and can be developed through specific playful activities The proposed framework of mapping playful leadership onto the three aspects of leadership development shows significant synergy between the aspects of leadership development and the characteristics of playful leaders. The next step will be to intentionally explore with participants if they regard themselves as playful leaders and to intentionally introduce this into the module itself. It will also be to bring our more intentionally in the module the intentionality about the use of playfulness to develop the playful leader mindset. Higher education is arguably in a period of tumultuous change and crisis (Whitton and Moseley, 2025); this calls for new ways of leading and thinking. There is a key role here for not only playful practice, but

courageous and playful leaders.

References

Abegglen, S., Burns, T. & Sinfield, S., (2021) Dialogic montage: Reflecting on playful practice in higher education, *The Journal of Play in Adulthood* 3(2), 82-95. https://doi.org/10.5920/jpa.843

Albone, A. (2024). *Effective Leadership Models in the Higher Education Practice.* Berwick Partners. https://berwickpartners.co.uk/insights/effective-leadership-models-in-the-higher-education-sector/ (accessed 1st December 2025).

Anthony S.G., Antony, J. (2017). Academic leadership – special or simple. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 66 (5), 630–637. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPPM-08-2016-0162

Bennis, W. and Thomas, R. (2002). The Crucibles of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2002/09/crucibles-of-leadership

Cable, L. (2019). Playful interludes. In N. Whitton and A. Moseley (Eds.). *Playful Learning* (57-70). Routledge.

Bolden, R. (2024). Reclaiming Leadership in Higher Education. https://blogs.uwe.ac.uk/leadership-and-change/reclaiming-leadership-in-higher-education/ (accessed 1st December 2025).

Bolden, R., Petrov, G. and Gosling, J. (2008). Tensions in Higher Education Leadership: Towards a Multi-Level Model of Leadership Practice. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62, 358-376. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00398.x

Bryman, A. and Lilley, S. (2009). Leadership Researchers on Leadership in Higher Education. *Leadership*, 5, 331-346. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715009337764

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper and Row.

Day, G. (2023). Playful Learning Conference Keynote. https://playfullearningassoc.co.uk/conference-24/conference23-keynotes/ (accessed 1st December 2025).

Dweck, C. S. (2006). Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. New York: Random House Publishing Group.

French, J. R. P., Jr., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). University of Michigan.

Hart, T., & Holmes, R. M. (2022). Exploring the connection between adult playfulness and emotional intelligence. *Journal of Play in Adulthood, 4*(1), 28-51.

Haslam, S. Alvesson, M. & Reicher, S.D (2024).Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35 (3). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101770.

Hill, J., & Cebulski, A. R. (2022). Leadership learning through games in co-curricular settings. *New Dir Stud Leadership*, June, 174, 31-41. https://10.1002/yd.20497

Hijkoop, V., Skovbjerg, H. & Bekker, T. (2024). Playful learning: Linking play properties to learning designs - a higher education scoping review. *The Journal of Play in Adulthood,* 6(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.5920/jpa.1329

Holflod, K., (2023) "Objects-To-Relate-With", *The Journal of Play in Adulthood* 5(1), 46-60. doi: https://doi.org/10.5920/jpa.1259

Hruška, D., Szarucki, M. and Marić, I (2025). Play As A Transformative Force: How Playful Leadership Fosters Identity, Creativity, And Innovation. *Proceedings of FEB Zagreb International Odyssey Conference on Economics and Business.* 8 (1) 2671-132X.

Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens. A study of the play element in culture*. The Beacon Press.

Ibarra, H. (2015). The authenticity paradox. *Harvard Business Review, 93*(1/2), 53-59.

Jones, S., Lefoe, G., Harvey, M., & Ryland, K. (2012). Distributed leadership: A collaborative framework for academics, executives and professionals in higher education, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34(1), 67-78. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2012.642334

Johnson, G., Whittington, R., Regnr, P. Scholes, K. and Angwin, D. (2017). Exploring strategy: text and cases. Pearson.

James, A. & Nerantzi, C. (2019). The power of play in higher education: creativity in tertiary learning. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kark, R. (2011). "Games Managers Play: Play as a Form of Leadership Development". *Academy of Management learning & education*. 10 (3), 507-527. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0048

Kennie, T., & Middlehurst, R. (2021). Leading in a crisis: Don't forget BC, get through DC, focus on AC. In *Leadership transitions in universities*, (pp. 171–195). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429331114-12

Kristiansen, P., & Rasmussen, R. (2014). Building a better business using the Lego serious play method. John Wiley & Sons.

Kruse, K. (2025). Forget VUCA. The World is BANI Now. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2025/02/03/forget-vuca-bani-is-the-new-framework-world/ (accessed 1st December 2025).

Küpers, W. (2017). Inter-play(ing) – embodied and relational possibilities of "serious play" at work". *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 30 (7), 993–1014. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-12-2016-0267

Lennoxsmith, F and Foster, W. (2025). *Framework for Leading in Higher Education: A report on the process of development,* AdvanceHE. https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10828?_gl=1*krcg8f*_gcl_au*MzA2NzczMzAzLjE3NjA5NDgwMTA.&_ga=2.130267535.1259898955.1763388768-290600144.1763388768

Lewin, K. (1939). Field theory and experiment in social psychology: concepts and methods. *American Journal of Sociology, 44,* 868–896. https://doi.org/10.1086/218177

Lubbers, K., Cadwallader, J., Lin, Q., Clifford, C. & Frazier, L. D., (2023) "Adult Play and Playfulness: A Qualitative Exploration of its Meanings and Importance", *The Journal of Play in Adulthood* 5(2), 1-19. doi: https://doi.org/10.5920/jpa.1258

Macfarlane, B. (2011). 'Professors as intellectual leaders: formation, identity and role'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36 (1): 57–73. https://10.1080/03075070903443734

Mainemelis, C., & Ronson, S. (2006). Ideas are born in fields of play: Towards a theory of play and creativity in organizational settings. *Research in organizational behavior,* 27, 81-131.

Moseley, A. (2020). "Leading playfully". *CHEF Talk*. https://dpu.au.dk/en/about-the-school/nyheder/single/artikel/chef-talk-leading-playfully

Nelson, S., & Padilla, C. (2022). Level up: Games for socially just leadership education. In J. D. Egan & J. N. Banter (Eds.). New Directions for Student Leadership: 174. *Games in leadership learning*, 121–128. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20505

Nørgård, R. T. and Whitton, N. (eds) (2025). *The Playful University*. Routledge.

Parkin, D. (2022). *What works for leadership in higher education.* AdvanceHE. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/what-works-leadership-higher-education

Poulsen, M. (2015). What is playful leadership?, *Counterplay*, 9 December. http://www.counterplay.org/what-is-playful-leadership/ (accessed 1st December 2025).

Proyer, R. T. (2017). A new structural model for the study of adult playfulness: Assessment and exploration of an understudied individual differences variable. *Personality and Individual Differences, 108,* 113–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.12.011

Proyer, R. T., & Wagner, L. (2015). Playfulness in adults revisited**:** The signal theory in German speakers. *American Journal of Play, 7*(2), 201–227.

Proyer, R.T., & Sendatzki, R. (2025). Examining Play and Playfulness at Work: Current Knowledge, Practical Applications, and Future Research Directions. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-020924-064249

Quinsee, S. (2021). From walking to surfing: Reflections on moving an educational leadership activity online. *Educational Developments*, 22(4), 10-14. https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/29586/

Quinsee, S., and Parker, P. (2024). Developing education leaders through creative approaches International *Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 24(2), 5–35. https://doi.org/10.29173/ijll33

Rayner, S., Fuller, M., McEwen L. and Roberts, H. (2010). Managing leadership in the UK university: a case for researching the missing professoriate? *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (6): 617-631. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903243100

Rickett, B., & Thompson, L. (2026). Beyond the academic imposter syndrome: A feminist relational discourse analysis of accounts of (un) belonging from UK working-class women academics. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 23(1), 87-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2024.2406339

Roos, J. (2006). Thinking from within: A hands-on strategy practice. Palgrave Macmillan.

https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230597419

Roos, J., Victor, B., Statler, M. (2004). Playing seriously with strategy, Long Range Planning, Volume 37, Issue 6, 2004, 549-568, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2004.09.005.

Schrier, K., Zahradnik, A., and Shaenfield, D. (2023). Playful Approaches to Leadership Development: Three Innovative Uses of Games in the Classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, *48*(4), 777-801. https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629231215065

Seybert, . L. (2014). A Phenomenological exploration of play among education leaders. Drake University.

Stefani, L (2015). Stepping up to leadership in higher education. All Ireland Journal of Higher Education. 7 (1). https://doi.org/10.62707/aishej.v7i1.216

Sońta, M. (2022). Designing playful employee experience through serious play–reflections from pre-pandemic corporate learning events in Poland. *Journal of Work-Applied Management* 5 April 2022; 14 (1): 126–144. https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-01-2021-0011

Rosen, M. (2019). *Michael Rosen's book of play. Why play really matters, and 101 ways to get more of it in your life*. Wellcome Collection.

Tökkäri V. (2015). Organizational play: within and beyond managing. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 10 (2). 86–104, doi: https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-11-2013-1181

Walsh, A. (2022) *Playful Leadership: An introduction and manifesto.* https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/lancsfairytales/playful-leadership-a-manifesto-pamphlet

Wareing, S. (2023). Five traits for higher education leadership – whatever your job title. Wonkhe. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/five-traits-for-higher-education-leadership-whatever-your-job-title/

Whitton, N., & Moseley, A. (2019). Play and learning in adulthood. In N. Whitton & A. Moseley (Eds.), *Playful learning events and activities to engage adults.* (12-24) Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351021869

Whitton, and Moseley, A. (2025).The Case for Playful Leadership),. Wonkhe. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-case-for-playful-leadership/

Zenk, L., Primus, D.J., and Sonnenburg, S. (2022). Alone but together: flow experience and its impact on creative output in LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®". *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 25 (6). 340–364 https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-09-2020-0362

Zhang, J., Yuan, S., Xing, L., Shao, Y., Deng, Y., and Li, P. (2025). Leading while playing: How leader fun pursuit affects leadership perceptions and evaluations. *Applied Psychology*, 74(1), e12583. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12583