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Developing Education Leaders Through Creative Approaches

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Abstract

There has been a considerable interest in how to develop effective leaders for higher education but there has been limited research in this area (Stefani, 2015). Quinsee and Parker (2017) discussed the lack of leadership development and support available for those in these roles and that this is an area that needed to be explored further. The changing nature of higher education with increased marketisation, higher student demand, rising workloads, and a changing student demographics, have all created challenges for university leaders. Over the past two years Covid-19 pandemic increased the range of challenges leaders had to manage and this for many has meant drawing on a wide range of skills and being creative in approaches to problem-solving (Kennie & Middlehurst, 2021). Effective leadership for the 21st century requires innovative approaches to lead organisations (Basadur, 2004). Creating opportunities for leadership development that are engaging and exploring different ways of supporting emerging leaders is therefore an area of increased interest. The importance of playful learning in creating a safe and supportive learning environment and supporting individuals to build resilience from learning from failure as well as success cannot be underestimated (Whitton & Moseley, 2019). This paper explores how different approaches to leadership development and support have been explored at City St George's, University London many of them according with Moseley's principles around playful leadership (Moseley, 2021).

***Keywords*:** playful leadership, leadership development, higher education, creative leadership

Introduction and Literature Review

Developing effective educational leaders in UK higher education is an area that has undergone more development in the last ten to fifteen years (Bolden et. al., 2014; Gibb et. al. 2013; Jones et al., 2012). In 2015, Stefani noticed the lack of research in this area although more work has happened over the last seven years in relation to leadership development programmes. Significant research has shown the benefit and importance of leadership development (Coll & Weiss, 2016; Debowski, 2015; Jarrett, 2021), although it is a mixed picture in relation to the impact of programmes in higher education (Dopson et al., 2018). The Leadership Foundation now part of AdvanceHE offers support for leadership development through thought leadership, development programmes and other work. However, despite the increasing availability of leadership development programmes, a significant number of staff still enter leadership positions without experiencing any formal support or development in leadership (Quinsee & Parker, 2017). This is particularly true in relation to education, where development programmes may be more generic or aimed at specific roles in relation to those leadership roles, such as heads of department. In relation to education or learning and teaching, there is less availability of tailored leadership programmes.

Developing effective leaders in higher education is even more significant in relation to the environment in which we now find ourselves. The global events since 2000 with the Covid-19 pandemic, move to more online forms of learning and teaching, the Black Lives Matter movement and increasing challenges to wellbeing of both staff and students are presenting University leaders with complex challenges like never before (Altmann & Ebersberger, 2013; Debowski, 2015; Coll & Weiss, 2016; Dopson et al., 2018). These events have already been layered on top of a number of challenges particularly facing UK higher education institutions such as Brexit, increasing marketisation of higher education, rising student demands, political debates about the values of

universities and changing social demographics. Many of the leadership models from the past do not work in this increasing complex and disruptive, and volatile environment. Universities are not necessarily known for rapid response in relation to change – for example taking eighteen months to design a new degree programme – yet the environment universities now find themselves operating in requires new modes of thinking and working, increasing flexible approaches and leadership resilience (Kremer et. al., 2019; Kennie & Middlehurst, 2021).

Early development of future leaders through internal development programmes could be regarded as a core responsibility of institutions to ensure future success for students and staff (McInnis et. al., 2012; Peters & Ryan, 2015; Coll & Weiss, 2016; Jarrett, 2021). Previous research undertaken demonstrated that the majority of educational leaders in our organisation had received little if any formal leadership development, yet overwhelmingly they felt that this would have been useful in their educational leadership roles (Quinsee & Parker, 2017). Dopson et al. (2018) found, more research is needed on the longer-term impact of leadership development, particularly in relation to the difference or otherwise of the higher education setting.

The variety of leadership development and complexity of the higher education environment seems to be a perfect storm in relation to leadership capacity to lead organisations in relation to educational delivery and adaptation. Without adequate focus and understanding of leadership capabilities and unprepared leaders, higher education institutions at the very least face considerable pain, and at the worst, may fail (Kennie & Middlehurst, 2021). Additionally, even where leadership development may exist, it may not necessarily meet the demands of the changing environment. However, taking novel and creative approaches can provide one solution for addressing this potential disconnect between the volatility of the environment surrounding higher education and the development of leadership skills within it. This paper looks at how creative approaches can be

deployed to engage educational leaders in innovative ways that enable a greater engagement with the challenging environment and meet the need for leadership development that is relevant and timely. The article gives three case studies of where creative and playful methodologies has been used to both develop leaders within a higher educational setting as well as enabling leaders to meet challenges that they are current facing within an organisation to develop novel approaches. In conclusion, the paper considers how these techniques could be deployed more widely to enable a more creative approach to leadership which is playful and enables leadership development to be ongoing and continually to meet the demands of the changing global environment.

Before considering the examples in more detail, the paper makes a case for playful leadership and how this can build resilience and well as collaboration in educational leaders to engender greater effective leadership practice and development.

What Do We Mean By "Play"?

Play can be a slippery concept to define, yet as Huizinga (1949) states, play is a fundamental part of existence (Whitton & Moseley, 2019). Play gives a freedom of expression, social connection, safety, meaning and fun to our everyday lives (Huizinga, 1949; Rosen, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2019). The concept of play engenders voluntary participation in activities that are demarcated from the "normal". This separation of play from other activities, its intrinsic "limitedness" means that when playing, one is in a space that can be termed as "beautiful" in terms of its enchanting appeal (Huizinga, 1949). The idea of play as all encompassing in the moment connects 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). Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet (1971) regard play as a unifying experience, where one moment flows into another. For them, play

is grounded in possibilities. Rosen (2019) encapsulates how play equally enables us to fail and to see how success might come from unexpected angles; “through this play, we create art”.

Play, then, is a fluid and free activity, that requires willing participation and the creation of safe environment that supports experimentation and undefined outcomes that is all encompassing for the participants. Constructing a playful opportunity, would require the creation of a bounded, yet, safe space, that enabled participants to willingly experiment and think freely. Although the activity may not fit with the notions of play as completely voluntary, as imagined by Huizinga, there would need to be opportunities for participants to exercise their free will in terms of the levels of engagement.

The notion of play in relation to adult learning is not without controversy. “Play” can be misunderstood as infantilising or trivialising participation (Whitton & Moseley, 2019). The very freeform, or one could even argue, pointlessness of play, can lead participants to reject play as wasting valuable work time, or in public sector settings “wasting tax-payers money”. As Whitton and Moseley (2019) clearly articulate the primary difference for adults who play is that they are making a conscious choice to engage in playful activities, unlike children whose play is instinctive. When playful activities for adults are well designed and structured, remaining true to those values of play as outlined above, or in other words, placing learning at the heart of the activity is key to successful engagement (Hutchinson & Lawrence, 2011).

Yet there are key arguments that make a case for why play should be a core part of enabling adults to think differently and there is a considerable case for using creative approaches to problem solving and leadership (Kark, 2011, Whitton & Moseley, 2019).

The ability of play or playful opportunities to engender creativity and free thinking has an appeal for leadership development. Leaders need to take risks, imagine alternative futures or

possibilities, take up different viewpoints and be comfortable seeking creative solutions. They also need to be able to fail and learn from their experiences; both positive and negative. Never has this been more so than the challenges facing those leaders in higher education, as we have seen.

It should be noted here that we are discussing play as opposed to games. Whilst games and gamification can be key to engaging adults in playful activities, our design of playful interludes and encouragement of playful practice in relation to leadership development is particularly around encourage that freedom and safety associated with the inherent values of play, rather than the specific rules and structures of games, although these too can have a significant role in leadership development. For the purposes of this article we are considering "play" in that broader form that potentially encompasses games, but is intrinsically about creative thinking and experimentation.

Kark (2011) argues that in leadership development, when the play is designed by the organisation means that the dichotomy between work and play becomes more of a continuum. So, play is undertaken both for pleasure and with the goal of growing and developing leaders (Kark, 2011). The role of play in creating safe spaces for experimentation which promotes development as well as creating identities is highlighted by Kark. This conceptualisation of the significance of play remains true to those characteristics of play as outlined by Huizinga. Where this becomes particularly significant is how Kark positions play as vital for "enhancing leaders' ability to be creative and promote ongoing innovations and organizational change" (Kark, 2011, p. 517).

By incorporating elements of play into leadership development programmes, then, there is the opportunity to support the creation of leaders who value and actively promote playful practices, or in other words, develop a playful leadership approach. There is relatively little research on what playful leadership encompasses although there is some literature that attempts to define some core attributes of playful leadership. Poulsen (2015) identifies two significant aspects of playful

leadership. First, enabling playful opportunities and secondly encouraging problem solving approaches through a playful mindset that supports free thinking and creativity. A playful leadership approach can also be identified with authenticity as a leader (Ibarra, 2015). Significantly, Ibarra identifies the adoption of playful practices by leaders as a way of articulating expectations and dealing with discomfort as a leader. Playful leadership then is a facilitative approach that engenders honesty and free expression. Through experimentation, leaders are able to inspire others to work with them and achieve shared goals.

More recently, a helpful framework articulating the facets of playful leadership has been developed by Moseley (2021). The framework has seven practices of playful leaders: social, dialogical, open, giving agency, goals, feedback loop and engagement/fun. These are outlined below by Moseley in the following ways:

- "Social" implies a connected and collaborative approach to leadership where the outcomes impacts on people;
- "Dialogical" means that playful leadership is a facilitative approach which gives people voices;
- "Open" playful leadership generates shared understanding and shared ownership; the playful leader is honest about why they are doing certain things;
- "Giving agency" – people involved are encouraged to try things for themselves with their own skills and abilities; acceptance that things may go wrong and we learn from that;
- "Goal" – this relates to visionary leadership, setting out the expectations for people;
- "Feedback loop" – as indicated above, the ability to encourage people to try and learn through failure; and
- "Engagement and fun" – encourage longevity of approach, how to retain interest and challenge.

This framework, particularly the first four principles, is based on Freire's approach around community building and beliefs that acknowledges the experiences that people bring to a particular

process. For leadership development this is a particularly compelling approach as it recognises the intrinsic skills, knowledge and values that people bring to their own development. What is also helpful about this framework is that it ties into collaborative approaches to leadership, such as that developed by Kouzes and Posner (1995, 2017) model whereby leadership is positioned as an activity of engagement with others as opposed to a solo, "hero" leader approach.

This paper has established a case for using play in leadership development and a framework through which to design or support both the creation of playful leadership opportunities or engender playful approaches in developing leaders. Three case studies are now presented that illustrate how this has worked in practice and the impact on participants.

Playful Leadership Development in Practice

Case Study 1: Developing educational leaders using Lego Serious Play

The Masters in Academic Practice is a programme designed and delivered for practicing staff in the University. It has various exit routes depending on the level of qualification that the staff member wishes to achieve. The programme is open to any staff members who are actively engaged in learning, teaching and assessment. These may be those staff in traditional academic roles and also staff who are undertaking support learning and teaching, such as working in academic support, the library or careers. As part of achieving the full Master's qualification, staff have the option to undertake a module entitled "developing your leadership and reflective practice". The objectives of this module are to:

- Appreciate a range of techniques to reflect on one's own practice and development;
- Explore current education issues that impact on the institution and individual roles;
- Examine individual's roles within departments, schools and institution and identify how to develop effective leadership for a range of internal and external contexts; and

- Provide tools and methods for understanding organisational culture and how this impacts on your leadership and reflective practice.

Participants on the module are encouraged to develop their leadership philosophy, explore their personal values and how this relates to the organisation around them, and understand what personal development they need to grow as leaders through undertaking a series of activities around knowing themselves, challenging their perceptions of leadership and exploring different leadership models. Exploring personal values and how this translates into leadership practice and development is a core part of the module. In order to develop this reflective practice and explore personal attitudes to leadership in a deep but also accessible way, the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY methodology has been used as part of the programme to consider leadership in relation to the settings around the participants.

The LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY methodology came out of a collaboration between business school professors and the LEGO® company around in the 1990s, finally, after a number of iterations coming to fruition around 2010 (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). It was born out of a recognition that organisations can struggle with engaging people in strategy and strategic thinking due to using techniques that unimaginative and stifle creativity. Ironically, at the very point where creativity is most needed – strategy development – leaders and organisations fall back on engagement styles and mitigation that is formulaic and disengaging. Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014) draw on Huizinga's notion of play to define the characteristics of serious play which are explorative and imaginative. The LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY then "is a thinking, communication and problem-solving approach for topics that are real for the participants" (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 43).

The Lego Serious Play methodology was chosen to engender this type of playful practice as it by nature collaborative as well as reflective. Mapping this to Moseley's attributes of playful

leadership, it can be seen to meet all of the seven attributes – the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY method is social – everyone must share their models; it is naturally dialogic as sharing the models, participants engage in a shared dialogue around leadership. The inclusive nature of the method requires everyone to build-share-reflect which meets the attribute of openness. Although questions are set by the facilitator, in this case the model leader, the participant has agency as they can interpret the questions as they wish. All models are "their" models to own, interpret and describe as they wish. Feedback is received from the facilitator and from comments or questions from other participants. Everyone must engage in the activity and "playing" with LEGO® is inherently fun.

The participants are supported through a series of questions and asked to build a range of models to meet these. Initially the session begins with a skills building activity to ensure that everyone is "on the same" page. This is critical part of the methodology and vital to ensure inclusive practice as well as engagement. 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. After this session, the questions become deeper and potentially more challenging. Often there is a shift in attention and engagement here as participants are drawn more deeply into their models and build connections both literally and figuratively. In relation to the leadership module a series of questions are posed that draw out reflections on the participants leadership practice, so building a model of their leadership identity at the current time, then going on to build a model of the dominant leadership practice in their area. This then highlights the gap, potentially, between their leadership identity and the leadership that is practice around them. Or it may pull out the synergies between the environment in which they are operating and the leadership that they espouse. The objective here is to ensure participants reflect on how their leadership identity is connected to and operates within a wider environment.

Finally, the participants are asked to build a model that outlines how the dominate leadership practices around them impact on their leadership philosophy and approach.

Using the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY method for this activity enables deeper engagement as the participants can build models that can be interpreted in numerous ways. It also enables participants to make connections between their values and the environment they are working in in a very tangible way. By guiding the participants through a series of questions about their values and leadership environment, they are able to spot connections and disparities that might have otherwise been missing. Participants are also able to engage in emotionally deep and potentially challenging situations in a less emotive fashion. Holding the bricks in a tangible way enables to the bricks to hold some of the emotion and the participant takes more of the role of an observer reflecting on those connections without having to interpret them. The "fun" element of the activity and feedback from other participants also supports the engagement aspects as participants are asked to reflect on their model or whether certain aspects of the models denote specific things. This can promote deeper reflection or just the observation "it's that colour because I liked it". Participants can choose the level of meaning that they wish to divulge whilst at the same time being required to share their reflections.

This activity has been run with over twenty participants over two iterations; one in person and one online. With the in person activity a longer, full day session was planned which resulted in a landscape being built of factors or "agents" that could impact on the participants leadership practice. The framing of the questions was slightly different between the two sessions with the in-person session considering different forms of leadership identity; so, the current leadership identity of the participants, to their perceived identity by others and their aspirational identity in order to demonstrate the gap, if there was one, between their different identities and how to bridge this.

Then the landscaping activity was added to demonstrate factors that might impact either positively or negatively or in an unknown way on the participant's practice. After feedback from the participants and given the changed circumstances due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the second session which was run online was shorter and more focused on engagement with the leadership culture in the environment around them. The online environment required a shorter session due to the challenges of engaging remotely for significant periods of time. The landscaping activity was also more challenging online so the focus was kept to the cultural dimension.

Using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY in this way enabled participants to engage more deeply with their leadership practice and make greater connections with the wider environment, which may have been hidden. It also had the added benefits of enabling participants to bond as a cohort and introduce some elements of "fun" into their practice, which were beneficial for their engagement and leadership reflection.

Case Study 2: Cultivating wellbeing in leadership with LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY

During various lockdowns and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, wellbeing and mental health have been paramount. Leaders in university settings have struggled with disconnection, fatigue and other mental health related issues experienced both by staff and students, whilst many have also faced challenges in their own wellbeing. Those leaders who have attempted to lead with compassion and show a concern for wellbeing and mental health have often experienced greater engagement from staff (Denney, 2020).

Whilst addressing the wellbeing of others, many institutional leaders have put their own wellbeing lower down the list of priorities or found themselves exhausted by the many demands of responding to their own staff. It was with this in mind that a series of sessions was designed to support a small group of senior educational leaders to enable them to prioritise their own mental

health and wellbeing and think about what they needed to support themselves. Three online LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY sessions were devised with the objective of sustaining wellbeing and positive mental health during lockdown. The first session looked at resilience through reflecting on the challenges of the previous year and planning for the following six months. Three months later, the second session explored work-life balance from a leadership perspective and how to achieve happiness. This session used Seligman's approach/PERMA model in *Flourish* as a foundation for exploring balance between different aspects of the participants life (Seligman, 2011). The PERMA model encompasses five foundational blocks of wellbeing – positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). These were explored through questions posed in the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY session. In the final session, six months later, the theme was transition and exploring what needed to be rebuilt or reset during a transitional time, both professionally and personally, as the year drew to a close.

The group was small with four participants all of whom were new to LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY in the first session so that session focused on skills building and then moved to exploring resilience through building models focused on core identities, what had impacted on this and then moving to think about aspirational identity and achievements over the following six months. The models also asked participants to explore what they needed in terms of support to reach their aspirational identity. In the second workshop, a reconnection challenge launched the session which then went on to explore what a positive work-life balance looked like and what it felt like when this was achieved. Then the participants were asked to build a model about their current perceptions on their work-life balance and what was impacting on this, as well as the impact of this on their leadership practice. Finally, participants were asked to consider what they wanted their balance to be and to build models or agents of what could impact upon this. The purpose here

was to enable the participants to do some landscaping and future planning in terms of what things may impact on them and what they could do to manage this. In a situation where many things were out of control, exploring possible options enabled participants to gain more control and agency in terms of the process.

The final session looked at transition and picked up on similar themes from the last two. Participants were asked to build models that looked at what they wished to “reset” or “rebuild” in their lives. The core part of this model was identified using the “red brick” technique to enable participants to reflect on what was a core aspect of this activity. What was their main focus as leaders in terms of challenges that they were facing or opportunities that they had and where they could make a difference. Lastly, using the part of the model identified using the “red brick” participants were asked to build a model that represented them achieving their reset in three months’ time, with that key aspect at the core. Discussion was had about what might impact on this, both positively and negatively.

These three workshops gave senior leaders the opportunity to take some time out to reflect on where they were and what they needed to sustain their own positive mental health and wellbeing. Exploring this from three different angles, relating to different responses and times of the year, gave leaders the chance to reflect in a structured and enjoyable manner on the challenges they were facing where they had made achievements and what they needed to do going forward. Structuring in this thinking and reflection time forced participants to take time out which was a more positive way of committing to their wellbeing as leaders. Feedback on this technique in these sessions was positive:

> I hadn't realised how enjoyable the sessions would be. It was so nice to chat to my colleagues about how I was feeling, rather than deal with business matters and rush to

> the next meeting. Or indeed how much I needed to stop and reflect on what I had achieved, how I was feeling about what I was and wasn't achieving and how I needed to take some care for me and think about the future on a personal level, not just professionally.
>
> The simplicity of the actions yet knowing they are under-pinned by a clever theory. That motivates me to engage in what we were doing and in turn get the most out of the session. I enjoyed the whole session and it was effective.
>
> The fun aspect. It is so easy to forget how much fun playing can be, and how it can help your mind to think/reflect and to stop being in the now all the time.

These three case studies using approaches to playful leadership to support and develop leaders overcome and manage challenges have enabled a creative approach to be applied with positive results.

Case Study 3: Using games to support staff with developing learning activities for students or staff

The last module of our Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice has a range of colleagues on who are in developing leadership roles. They are often programme leaders or moving into this role or where they provide support and co-ordination for colleagues around learning and teaching or lead other education initiatives. Frequently these colleagues are faced with challenges in terms of having to implement new learning and teaching activities for students or staff development sessions for colleagues. This often makes colleagues anxious and leads to traditional approaches to the problems which work but are not very engaging. It was therefore felt that this last module which focused on Professional and Personal Development Planning and preparing colleagues for taking on leadership roles was an ideal place to introduce participants to play and a games-based approach to developing activities thus using more creative approaches to these challenges. The module itself is the last module in the Postgraduate Certificate part of the MA

Academic Practice Programme and so is undertaken by all completing this. One of the module's aims is:

- Examine new ideas within individual practice and demonstrate enhanced professional practice

The module content is focused on enhancing your academic identity, enhancing your teaching through reflection and peer review, developing teaching excellence, teaching recognition and continuing professional development. Adding playful learning to this seemed to be appropriate as participants were continuing on a leadership development journey.

The module has between 30 – 40 applicants undertaking it each year and throughout the module they are placed in teams to undertake activities. The module has three taught days which can be provided both in person and online and then uses asynchronous activities between these days some of which are individual and some are team based. For colleagues to engage in this activity fully they needed some time to reflect following being introduced to the concept of playfulness. They have an introduction to playful learning on the afternoon of day two and then in their teams they are given their challenges. These are provided in each team's online forum. The teams are then encouraged to work together on the forum and through meetings to develop a game to meet their challenge and this then has to be presented to the whole group on day three. In the forum each team is also given some constraints to work within. Examples of the challenges and constraints used are in Table 1.

This team activity has led to a range of approaches to the challenges and include quizzes, campus tours for students, board game, card games and online games. The feedback from participants has been that this has helped them consider new approaches to their practice and made them realise that there is room for creativity in their role.

Table 1
Challenges and Constraints

Challenges	Constraint
You need to support core mathematics skills for first year science undergrads. You have several hour-long sessions with the students all online.	Your players have low attention spans and must be kept occupied at all times.
You have been invited to present your experiences of online learning at a departmental meeting and you need to engage staff as well as inspire them.	The institution's ethos frowns upon overt competition.
You want to bring students and staff together online to revise the BA Actuarial Science curriculum. You have 3 hours to run the game.	You know that some of the participants have limited internet connections.
New students need to learn about key student services online. The University has a £1000 fund for induction.	Your game must work with 20 players
Your Programme needs to fit better around staff workload/timetables, but they are different for each person. Could a game help staff or the programme to manage time better?	Your game must occupy at least 30 minutes of time.
International students studying for postgraduate courses need help in learning and using academic language online. You have a small development budget of £100.	Your participants do not always meet at the same time and are in multiple locations/time zones.

Although taking a more games-based approach to playful learning, this example still enables the development of a playful mindset and is consistent with the framework for playful leadership as developed by Moseley (2021). By doing this activity in teams, it fits with the social and dialogical principles of the framework. Participants need to work together to create the most appropriate playful opportunity for the scenario. This social and dialogical working has often resulted in changes to original ideas and negotiation over the goals. Participants have commented that through dialogue and conversation they have often radically changed their games design. This activity is also open. Participants must share ideas and free that they are in a safe space to make suggestions as well as owning the outcomes. Often participants then go on to adapt their chosen game or playful activity in their own learning and teaching practice, fitting with the principle of giving agency. By structuring the playful opportunity through the design of a game, there is a clear goal and outcome for the participants. The vision is that they can use play to problem solve and engender new ways of engaging staff or students, depending on which scenario they choose and also gain ideas from colleagues. Even the activity itself is playful in design with participants being given additional information about the scenario that may constrain it or provide new opportunities over the course of the activity. Feedback is embedded both within the structure of the activity and also in the presentation when participants present their game to the rest of the group and everyone votes on the most viable or exciting contribution. Finally, this definitely fits with the principle about engagement and fun. Participants comment positively that they have enjoyed the activity and engaged in a more active way. Some have experimented with games in the past and many comment that they are more confident to do this in the future. The shared construction of the game enables experimentation and the co-constructed nature of the activity enables participants to trial new ideas in a safe environment.

Conclusion

These three case studies have demonstrated how play can support with the development of educational leaders in higher education. In each example, the inclusion of playful practice has enabled the creation of a safe space where developing leaders can explore challenging concepts and creatively problem solve. This might be through collaboration or thinking differently in relation to their own practice. By introducing play in this way, the participants are encouraged to use playful leadership in their own leadership practice as they can see first-hand the benefits of this approach for their own learning.

Moseley's (2021) framework for playful leadership has been used a useful lens with each case study to demonstrate how the playful opportunity concords with a wider perception around the qualities of playful leadership. This is significant in leadership development as it is about positioning new approaches and models to developing leaders to demonstrate the qualities that may be required of educational leaders in the future as they face more uncertainty.

Although the groups for these activities were relatively small scale and limited to activities in one institution, the feedback from participants was unanimous in terms of the engagement and inspiration experienced from using these approaches. A further area of research would be to take these practices and explore with larger groups over a longer period of time or in other institutions to ascertain the longer-term impact of such interludes. One of the benefits of these activities for the participants was the novelty and uniqueness of the approach, if using such activities more regularly and widely one would need to be mindful of innovation "fatigue". There is a need to keep these activities fresh and different, a possible challenge for all playful leaders.

This article has reflected on the benefits of a playful leadership approach which is one that is potentially empowering new leaders who face considerable challenges in the higher education

landscape. We plan to embed these activities further through a broader educational leaders' development programme grounded on the principles of playful leadership practice. Those principles of play – freedom of expression, creative problem solving, collaboration, safety – are core to those principles required for successful leadership development, and we would argue, the future practice of our leaders. Leaders in higher education need to be creative and collaborative. So, let's play!

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Professor Susannah Quinsee – Susannah is Vice-President (Digital and Student Experience) at City St George's, University of London. As Vice-President she leads on institutional projects and strategy to support education and students including around digital transformation and student attainment. Susannah is a Visiting Professor for Library and Learning Services at the University of Northampton. She is National Teaching Fellow (2011), a SEDA Senior Fellow and AdvanceHE HEA Principal Fellow and was a Learning and Teaching Excellence Ambassador for AdvanceHE. Susannah is a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY facilitator and tries to bring as much LEGO® into her life as possible. She blogs on a (fairly) regular basis (www.sqhq.co.uk), particularly if it is about Lego and rekindling her love of women's poetry, which she studied for her PhD. She has four children, including twins and is passionate about inclusivity in higher education. Susannah is continually reflecting on how to achieve a "happy" balance in all aspects of her life and how to lead with compassion and fun.

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Professor Pam Parker – Pam is Interim Director of the Learning Enhancement and Development directorate at City St George's, University of London. In this role she focuses on developing, supporting, advising and sharing good practice with colleagues to enhance the learning, teaching and assessment activities provided for students. Having initially trained as a registered nurse and then taught nursing for 16 years Pam brings to her role experience of mentoring and supporting individuals through a range of situations using collaboration, compassion, and empathy. Pam is a National Teaching Fellow (2017), a SEDA Senior Fellow and an AdvanceHE Principal Fellow. Pam co-chairs SEDA's Conference and Events Committee, is an AdvanceHE accreditor and a reviewer for a range of international journals.

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