

Laughing with leaders: reflective humour and critical insight in the leadership learning space

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Abstract

The contested nature of leadership (so, what's the problem with leadership?) – combined with the anxieties of some UK and international undergraduate cohorts around the idea of critical thinking – means that teaching reflectively about 'leaders' and the doing of 'leadership' poses a number of challenges. In this seminar I discuss some early thinking regarding the use of reflective humour and its' contribution in energising undergraduate leadership learning. Drawing on critical pedagogy, theory of comedy and the literature on the use of humour in learning, I argue for the value of employing the *comic gaze* as an aid to teaching meaningfully about leadership; as a uniquely engaging way of facilitating debate, (self) reflection and insight concerning the incongruities and anomalies inherent in contemporary conceptions and practices of business, political and organisational leadership. However, while thoughtful humour is useful in learning, comedy is neither impartial nor necessarily benign. Drawing also on my own experience of leadership education and learning, I consider some of the main arguments for using reflective humour as a critical thinking device in the undergraduate setting; and identify important ethical questions that need to be taken into account by leadership curriculum designers and educators.

Key words: Leadership education, reflective humour, critical insight

John Gibney: January 2021