

How to cite the article:

Reed, J. (2025). Fostering leadership through peer facilitation in an analog game-based university course. *PanSIG Journal*, 11(2), 180–187. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPanSIGJ11.2-21>

Practice Article

Fostering Leadership through Peer Facilitation in an Analog Game-Based University Course

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Abstract

This paper presents a teaching practice centered on analog games and peer-led learning, implemented in a university-level, self-directed study course in Japan. In the 2025 iteration, students facilitated tabletop game sessions as Game Masters (GMs), functioning as Near-Peer Role Models (NPRMs). These peer leaders taught rules, led sessions, and managed group dynamics—mirroring authentic leadership roles in a low-stakes, collaborative environment. This article describes the structure and rationale of the course and offers reflections and practical insights for educators seeking to nurture student autonomy and leadership through ludic media.

本論では、日本の大学における自主研究型授業の一環として実施された、アナログゲームとピア主導型学習を中心とした教育実践を紹介する。2025年度の実施では、学生がゲームマスター (GM) としてテーブルトップ・ゲームのセッションを主導し、ニア・ピアロールモデル (Near-Peer Role Models: NPRMs) として機能した。これらの学生リーダーは、ゲームのルールを教え、セッションを進行し、グループ内のダイナミクスを管理するなど、協働的かつ低リスクな環境の中で、実際のリーダーシップに近い役割を担った。本稿では、当該授業の構成とその教育的意図を説明し、学生の自律性とリーダーシップを遊戯的なメディアを通して育むことに関心のある教育者に向けた考察と実践的な示唆を提供する。

This article presents a year-long (two semester) university course design that integrates analog games with student leadership development. Started at a private Japanese university in the 2023 academic year, the elective course, 自主研究 (Jishu Kenkyuu or “Self-Directed Study”), is aimed at second- and third-year International Studies majors. In the first implementation of the course, the teacher led two sections of four students once per week each and introduced them to different tabletop games in English. The course was developed more for a second iteration in 2024, which has been detailed in Reed (2025). Foremost among the changes was a shift to a “student-led” learning model in which the teacher took on an organizational role (e.g. setting up groups, preparing materials, arranging reflection meetings, etc.), while some of the students became leaders for their game groups. The leaders were selected from among several students who enrolled in the course for a second time, and thus had the benefit of knowing some of the games already. This paper follows up with the third iteration of the course for the 2025 academic year, where the focus has been on refining the materials for the course as well as creating more opportunities for student leaders to help their groups thrive. In 2025, 10 students were enrolled in the course—five Japanese and five Indonesian—whose English proficiency generally ranged from B1 to C1 on the CEFR scale. However, as there are no formal English language proficiency requirements to enroll in the course, no test was administered.

The course’s third iteration has continued to explore whether students can not only participate in structured gameplay with analog board games, but also assume facilitative roles typically managed by teachers. The aim was to position selected students as Game Masters (GMs) who would choose the games and lead peer gameplay sessions while managing group dynamics. The potential benefits included increased autonomy and development of leadership and collaboration skills, all within a structured, ludic environment.

Theoretical Framework

Analog tabletop games have emerged in the literature as effective tools for language learning and fostering social interaction (Reid, 2024; Spano et al., 2021; York, 2019, 2023), with a recent systematic review from Poole (2025) confirming the efficacy of much of the research in this space. Beyond language learning, research has shown that tabletop games have the potential to promote civic engagement and taking learning outside of the classroom (deHaan, 2020), improving mental well-being (Gauthier et al., 2019), building entrepreneurial skills (Shaikh, 2023), and learning

in general (Sousa et al., 2023).

More recent work (Reed, 2024) has examined how leadership skills can be developed through the Game Master (GM) role in analog, tabletop games. Typically, the term “GM” is reserved for Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TRPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which one participant—the GM—functions as a storyteller, rules adjudicator, and game facilitator in control of setting the scene for the players and advertising choices for them to make in the game world. The specific roles and functions of a GM mentioned briefly above have been detailed extensively in Tychsen et al. (2005). In addition to expanding the definition of GM to include running and teaching a tabletop board game, Reed (2024)’s study suggested that it may not be the specific game, but the structure and responsibilities assumed by the GM that lead to effective leadership outcomes. In accordance with this observation, Dashiell (2022) explained how many of the unspoken rules of being a GM, such as managing group dynamics, are akin to those required of good leaders. The role of a GM, in comparison to other forms of peer-led activities, is unique in that being a good GM requires both prior knowledge of the game system and mechanics, as well as some ability to facilitate others’ verbal interactions.

Leadership development is an increasingly important aspect of higher education in Japan. Beyond equipping students with English language proficiency, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has been specifically calling for educators to focus on cultivation of skills such as initiative, leadership, creativity, and collaboration (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2023). This shift reflects broader demands in society and the workplace, where leadership potential is valued not just in formal roles, but in the ability to guide, support, and work with others effectively. In 2021, Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) conducted a survey of 381 businesses across Japan, asking them what competencies they expected to see in university graduates entering the job market. “Teamwork, Leadership, and Collaboration” was selected by almost 80% of the respondents as being “especially expected of new graduates” (2022).

Within education, Watkins and Hooper (2023) advocate strongly for instilling leadership skills in students in spite of public and private sector pressure to do so. They see developing leadership as something that can benefit people for their whole lives, as they enact leadership behavior in future communities they inhabit, even outside of the workplace. When students are empowered to lead, they are given a space where a feeling of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017)—ownership over one’s actions and behaviors—can flourish. In Basic Psychological Needs Theory (Ryan et al., 1996), the need for autonomy is seen as one crucial aspect of continuous mental well-being, and the benefits of this in student-led communities can be seen clearly in the literature. In one study (Watkins, 2021), the researcher designed and implemented a course to develop student leaders with the aim of promoting autonomy. The results of interviews revealed that the student leaders gained “confidence in their approaches” (p. 20) as well as “ownership” (p. 20) within their learning communities. This demonstrates that leadership skills can be taught with a direct approach, and that doing so can encourage the development of autonomy, which then leads to better psychological well-being.

In addition to the potential increase in employability and psychological benefits of developing leadership skills, the pedagogical choice of placing students in positions of leadership also draws upon the concept of Near-Peer Role Models (NPRMs). NPRMs were defined by Murphey (1996) as individuals slightly ahead of learners in ability or experience who serve as accessible and relatable guides. Unlike teachers or other authority figures, NPRMs often offer more realistic and motivating examples for students to emulate due to their close proximity in terms of age and experience. Murphey (1995) explains that “students need these role models to inspire them and show them that [learning] is possible” (p. 3).

Although analog game use in education is increasingly documented, less attention has been paid to student-facilitated gameplay in formal university courses. This paper responds to that gap by illustrating a model in which students not only engage with games, but take responsibility for running them. While peer-led learning can be implemented through a variety of formats, such as presentations, group discussions, or project-based tasks, analog tabletop games offer several distinctive affordances that make them particularly suitable for leadership development in autonomous learning contexts. Tabletop games provide clearly defined roles, rules, and goals that structure the interaction (i.e. a well-defined end state required for winning and the rules for achieving it) while still allowing space for improvisation and negotiation. The GM role, in particular, embeds leadership within the activity itself rather than positioning it as an external or evaluative position. This combination of structure and flexibility allows students to assume leadership responsibilities in a way that feels authentic, socially grounded, and low-stakes, aligning well with autonomy-supportive and NPRM-based pedagogical principles.

Description of the Teaching Practice

Students, Schedule, and Learning Environment

A total of 10 students participated in 2025. When they played games together, they met in shared collaborative learning spaces on the university campus. Some of these spaces operate on an advance reservation system, while others are free to use if unoccupied, and students are able to choose a location they prefer and to change it from week to week if desired. Students were placed into a total of five groups of between three and five members, with each student belonging to two separate groups to increase peer interaction. Each student met with their two groups once a week for a total of two meetings per week. The meetings were scheduled based around students’ other course schedules throughout the week, and the groups were formed based on these same schedules as well as consideration of prior

gaming experience, students’ backgrounds, and their year in school.

Each group was led by a student GM, selected by the instructor based on prior course experience, familiarity with analog games, or a demonstrated history of responsible student behavior in past course enrollments (e.g. submitting assignments on-time and a consistent record of attendance). A student could freely decline if they did not want to be a GM. GMs were responsible for:

- Selecting and preparing a game from the shared games library
- Teaching the game to their group
- Managing the game sessions and resolving rules-related questions
- Reporting attendance or any other issues to the instructor

Games were categorized into four levels of complexity, based on rules weight as listed on BoardGameGeek.com and other factors such as requiring a long time to learn, having asymmetrical rules systems (i.e. where different players follow different sets of rules or having differening win conditions) whether the game has a “campaign” structure—requiring multiple play sessions and potentially including a narrative/storybook—or if it can be played in one sitting. The games available in the shared library were organized into the four levels shown in Table 1. In general, greater language dependency would be required for the higher levels, but this is not a hard rule. For some games such as Dice Throne in Level 2, players have their own hidden hand of cards. Therefore, not being able to process the language on them would prohibit a lower-proficiency player from participating effectively. At the same time, Photosynthesis—in the same level—has no hidden information, and is a very visual and tactile game that makes meaning through the appearance of the game components and visuals themselves rather than text. Despite this difference, both games are of a similar difficulty in terms of game mechanics (2.1-2.2 out of 5.0 for rules weight on Board Game Geek), and that is how the games were organized for this course.

Table 1

Tabletop Games for the Jishu Kenkyuu Course Organized by Levels

| Level | Game Titles |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Level 1 (Introductory) | Clue, Hanamikoji, Codenames, One Night: Werewolf, Cash 'n Guns |
| Level 2 (Standard) | 7 Wonders, Catan, Forbidden Island, Dice Throne, Blade Rondo, Dorasure, Photosynthesis |
| Level 3 (Complex) | Blood Rage, Clank!, Eschaton, Legends of Andor, Everdell, Of Dreams and Shadows, [Redacted], Nexus Infernum, Smiths of Winterforge, Return to Dark Tower, Sorcerer, Viticulture, Dead of Winter, Zombicide |
| Level 4 (Campaign, Higher Complexity) | Darklight: Memento Mori, Folklore, HEXplore It, Scythe, Sleeping Gods, Root, Robinson Crusoe: Adventures on the Cursed Island, Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood, Machina Arcana, Fury of Dracula, Black Rose Wars |

Students had full autonomy to choose games from the library that interested them and could change the game they were playing if it did not appeal to them after all. If there were disagreements about which game to play, then the group’s GM would have the final say. The games were all located in the instructor’s office, which remained locked when the instructor was not in. Therefore, the student GM was asked to inform the teacher of which game they would play so that it could be set out for them in advance. Repeated gameplay with the same title was encouraged in order to help lower the cognitive burden of continuously needing to learn new rules, and therefore increasing space for other types of learning (i.e. language learning) to take place—a recommendation first articulated in York (2020).

Implementation

First, the design choices for the 2025 iteration—including positioning students as GMs, allowing autonomy in game choice, and structuring groups with mixed experience—were intentional applications of the autonomy-supportive, leadership-focused, and NPRM-based principles outlined previously.

When the course began in 2023, the teacher selected all games and led all sessions. There were no student GMs. In 2024, student GMs were introduced, and gameplay occurred in a SAC (Self Access Center), but students were still assigned specific games by the teacher. The structure of the course in its most recent 2025 iteration represents the third year of the course’s evolution. In this iteration, students selected their own games, and groups operated fully independently under student GMs.

At the beginning, students were placed into groups based on their schedules. At this initial meeting, guidelines for earning credits and assessment were explained as well as the basic flow and expectations for participation. The expectations and responsibilities for GMs were also outlined and explained. The specifics of how students are assessed are outlined in the following Assessment section.

Moreover, information about the course, such as the schedule and the game library was provided via an LMS (Learning Management System), including links to further resources and the level for each game. Several patterns for a shared “language policy” were offered to give students an idea of the choices they had regarding language learning. For instance, a group could decide to speak and play games entirely in English, split the time equally between English and Japanese, alternate languages every week, or design their own plan.

There was also an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page to help students navigate common problems they might encounter. For example, what to do if a group member were consistently absent, if the group wanted to change their meeting place or time, or guidelines on how long game sessions should be. For the latter, it was recommended that students spend at least one class period (105 minutes) playing their game(s), but that longer time-frames might be necessary depending on the game length.

Other than the LMS and the initial meeting, students were then left to choose their games, set their language policy during gameplay (if desired), start learning to play, and consult with the teacher if they encountered something they wanted assistance with or could not manage on their own.

Assessment

The course operates on the principle of student autonomy, with the teacher having limited presence except when requested by students. Students can also freely choose which games they want to play, where they want to play, for how long, and when they want to make changes. In addition, no formal assessment of GM performance is conducted; instead, overall participation and engagement are the focus.

However, as a pass/fail based course, a means of determining this is needed. To earn credits, accomplishing three tasks is necessary: one achievement-based, one effort-based, and one verbal assessment. These three tasks are illustrated in table 2 below:

Table 2

2025 Jishu Kenkyuu Assessment

| Task | Assessed by... |
|---|---|
| Effort-based: Attend 60 hours or more in total worth of game sessions with group members. | Attendance and Time Log |
| Achievement-based: Able to set up and play at least one game in the Level 3 category with partners. | Game Log and Discussion/Reflection sessions |
| Verbal: Attend two end-of-term discussion/reflection sessions to demonstrate learning | In-person |

The “Attendance and Time Log” and “Game Log” (on the back of the sheet) is completed at the end of each game session, with the GM responsible for ensuring that it is complete. The two-sided sheet includes all of the following details:

- Game session date
- Student names
 - Absent, present, late
- Length of session
- Game played
- Notes/Other

The two discussion meetings will be used as opportunities to reflect on what they have learned, what challenges they faced in their groups, and as a means for the teacher to confirm students’ achievement. In addition, meetings will serve as an opportunity to gather student feedback about the course.

Finally, there is no foreign language assessment done in the course, as no specific language mandates were imposed on the students (i.e., no requirement to use only English). Students can decide whether they want language learning to be a group or personal goal and are asked to set and agree on this at the beginning of the term.

Outcomes and Observations

With respect to game selection, Clue (Level 1) was the most popular choice early in the term, followed soon after by Dice Throne (Level 2), which became the most frequently played game across all groups in the spring term. Other games such as Dorasure, Forbidden Island, and Catan (all Level 2) saw intermittent play, while others were not played at all (e.g. Level 4 games). Students often chose to stay with the same game and appeared to require encouragement to “level up” or change games.

As described previously, no particular language mandate was made, and students were free to choose whether or not they wanted to play games all in one language, or a mixture of two or more languages. While data were not gathered on language use during the game sessions, informal interactions with the students throughout the semester revealed that most tended to use either English or their mother tongue, whichever was most expedient for the task at hand whether it was explaining rules, reading a card or other game component aloud, or engaging in conversation unrelated to the game. In short, when given complete freedom, no groups adhered to any rigid language policy.

Because the 2025 course is ongoing as of writing, it is impossible to say whether or not this structured, albeit hands-off approach to leadership development, collaboration, and language learning will result in positive outcomes. However, informal student feedback from the 2024 version of the course offers insight into both the course’s value as well as the challenges it faces. This feedback was collected as a means of improving the course design and for teaching reflection purposes.

One major motivation was to give students an opportunity to develop leadership skills (both in 2024 and in 2025). Students reported some challenges such as feeling the need to explain the rules repeatedly to some participants who did not read them, in addition to perceived differences in motivation. Several students expressed frustration at the fact that a group member would be consistently absent or showed little interest in playing.

Part of the reason for organizing the games into different levels in 2025 was to help student GMs avoid choosing games that might be too difficult for them to run effectively or introduce to novices with limited game experience. Despite these efforts, attendance and motivation to play still appear to be an issue for some students in 2025, and an exploration into the reasons for this may reveal that these issues are partially attributable to group dynamics, which is the responsibility of the GM to manage.

Students in 2024 also mentioned the social and collaborative benefits, with most members saying that they loved cooperating with everyone to clear cooperative games. Japanese students particularly enjoyed having the opportunity to communicate with international students about something other than just standard, everyday topics and coursework.

While language learning outcomes were not assessed, some students nevertheless felt that the course benefitted them in this regard. One student in particular was expressly motivated to learn and use English more due to the course. This student did not study abroad and at the time of enrollment was no longer taking any required English courses. In his reflection, he attributed an increase of nearly 200 points in his TOEIC Listening and Reading score—from 300 to 490—to his experience playing board games in Jishu Kenkyuu. This student re-enrolled, and went on to become a GM in 2025. Of course, this is only a single case and is therefore anecdotal and should not be generalized, as it is impossible to say with any degree of accuracy how much the course actually contributed this student’s test score.

Discussion

The teaching practice described here presents a game-based, self-directed alternative to teacher-centered game-based learning. While much of the existing literature explores how teachers facilitate game learning, this model shows that students can lead those experiences themselves and thereby develop leadership skills and autonomy at the same time.

The experience of developing and implementing this course over three iterations suggests that peer facilitation is a viable pathway for developing leadership within a language-learning or content-based courses. Compared to more structured forms of game-based instruction, this student GM style trades some consistency and on-the-spot teacher feedback for increased student ownership, leadership development, and deeper social interaction, as evidenced in the student feedback elicited thus far.

Of course, the model advocated for here is no panacea, and a number of issues have been reported by students across the iterations of the course, including (a) the game selection not being broad enough, (b) the student GMs failing to teach the rules clearly or understand the game themselves, (c) some members lacking interest, and (d) group members’ language learning goals not being aligned. Work continues to further develop the course and address these issues.

It is true, however, that the student GMs assumed genuine responsibilities. They coordinated sessions, explained game rules, maintained a positive atmosphere, and responded to peer issues. These responsibilities reflect transferable leadership skills relevant to students’ professional futures, and the identification of tabletop games as a valid medium for developing these competencies—along with collaboration and language learning—is increasingly supported by research in the field. Games are not merely toys, but have significant potential within educational contexts.

Going beyond the classroom, students equipped with leadership skills may be more likely to identify themselves as active contributors even in settings where they are not the official leader.

Conclusion

This paper highlights several key takeaways for educators interested in using analog games to promote student leadership or other pedagogical goals such as language learning, in an autonomous, student-centered fashion. Peer facilitation using NPRMs (Murphey, 1996) provides accessible opportunities for meaningful collaboration, particularly when structured around a role such as a GM within an analog, game-based learning environment in which authentic opportunities for leadership can also be developed (Reed, 2024). Ideal student GMs are those who have some familiarity with the genre, or are generally motivated and curious students open to learning and trying new things.

The teacher's role in this practice is heavier at the beginning when forming the groups, schedules, roles and expectations, and preparing the games library. In particular, building a games library can be a demanding task that takes place over years, especially without insitutional funding or support. However, one can start small with games like *One Night: Ultimate Werewolf* or *Codenames*, both of which are relatively inexpensive and can accommodate around 8-10 players.

When building a library, it is also worth considering having a range of game types that might appeal to a wider audience. The games in my collection are still mostly representative of my own taste in games, which is admittedly a constraint. At the same time, having every game available on the market is also not realistic for both space and budgetary reasons. Nevertheless, a library is a constantly growing work in progress, and should only become more diverse with time—especially if students are given opportunity for input.

While nurturing student GMs and developing leadership skills has been the focus of this paper, it is naturally possible to run an analog games-based course with the teacher acting as facilitator and GM as in a traditional classroom setting. Indeed, this may be the preferred option depending on the learning goals of the course at hand, the learning context, whether a teacher's verbal corrective feedback is seen as important, and both the teacher's and students' comfort with self-directed approaches. In addition, for students with lower English proficiency in an ESL/EFL setting, it becomes more important to be selective about the games themselves, choosing ones that are shorter, less rules heavy, and do not rely on players having hidden information. For larger groups, having each "player" role be "co-managed" by multiple students; "a player's" moves must be agreed upon and negotiated by several students communicating together (see Poole, 2021). In short, the method described here is adaptable to any setting, including a classroom, SAC, or extra-curricular club. Educators seeking to balance structure with autonomy and self-directed learning may also find this model useful for developing a range of competencies other than leadership training, including language learning, collaboration, or others. Although how each of these can be implemented is beyond the scope of this paper. It should be noted, however, that for language learning specifically, changes to the model described here—such as preparing language aids, worksheets, or other tools to encourage students to focus on language—would be necessary.

For future iterations of this course, I intend to explore the feasibility of subgenre tracks within games (e.g., solo games, TRPGs), incorporate more reflective tools to promote deliberate focus on learning, and offer more coaching or direct support to GMs before assigning them to their groups. These changes may help maintain enjoyment whilst offering support to student GMs who are less confident, and allowing non-GMs to recall their learning goals and refocus their efforts on them.

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