

From Prototype to Pitch: Learning Entrepreneurial Communication Through Gameplay

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Abstract: Technical-discipline entrepreneurship students often equate entrepreneurial success with product quality rather than the ability to communicate value. This paper presents a qualitative, practice-based case study of a competitive classroom activity designed to challenge that assumption. The “airplane storytelling game” was implemented over four annual cohorts within an undergraduate entrepreneurship elective on a software development programme, involving approximately 12 students per cohort and 48 students in total. Working in small teams, students designed and tested a paper aircraft capable of carrying a coin before delivering a sales-style pitch to judges acting as investors. Prototype performance and pitch quality received equal weighting. Data were drawn from contemporaneous lecturer observation notes, student comments recorded during post-activity discussion, and reflective teaching notes. The cohort-level implementation, rather than the individual student, was the principal unit of comparison. Across the four cohorts, most teams devoted substantially more effort to technical refinement than to pitch preparation. Teams repeatedly tested folds, wing structures and weight distribution, while pitches were often prepared late and delivered with limited narrative structure. More persuasive presentations frequently outperformed technically stronger prototypes, generating surprise and prompting students to reconsider assumptions about entrepreneurial success. The paper interprets this discrepancy as a form of experiential misalignment: gameplay makes the consequences of underinvesting in communication visible, thereby creating a basis for reflection and conceptual learning. The findings do not suggest that communication substitutes for product quality; rather, they show that technical value must be made clear, credible and relevant to stakeholders. The study contributes a replicable, low-technology example of games-based entrepreneurship education and identifies practical implications for teaching pitching, teamwork, value articulation and the allocation of effort under time pressure. It also acknowledges the limits of cohort-level observational evidence and the instructor’s combined roles as designer, judge and analyst within a single institutional and disciplinary setting and context.

Keywords: Games-based learning, Entrepreneurship education, Experiential learning, Entrepreneurial communication, Pitching

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship education has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shifting from predominantly theoretical approaches toward pedagogies that emphasise experiential learning and active participation (Motta and Galina 2023). Traditional business plan-focused teaching methods have gradually been complemented by experiential approaches that allow students to engage with entrepreneurial processes directly (Neck et al. 2014). This shift reflects the understanding that entrepreneurship is not merely a body of knowledge but also a set of behaviours, competencies, and mindsets that are best developed through practice.

Among the pedagogical approaches that support experiential entrepreneurship education, games-based learning (GBL) has gained increasing attention. Games create structured environments where participants engage with challenges, make decisions, and observe the consequences of those decisions in real time (Garris et al. 2002). By introducing elements such as competition, constraints, and feedback, gameplay activities can simulate aspects of real-world decision-making processes while maintaining a safe environment for experimentation.

Research in educational psychology suggests that games-based learning can enhance engagement and motivation by transforming passive learning environments into interactive experiences (Whitton 2014). In such environments, students are not merely recipients of knowledge but active participants who experiment with strategies and reflect on outcomes. This aligns closely with experiential learning theory, which emphasises the role of concrete experiences and reflective observation in knowledge development (Kolb 1984).

Within entrepreneurship education specifically, experiential approaches are widely regarded as essential (Al-Hattami et al. 2025). Entrepreneurship involves navigating uncertainty, identifying opportunities, and persuading stakeholders to support new ideas. As a result, teaching entrepreneurship effectively requires pedagogical approaches that allow students to practice these behaviours in realistic settings (Neck and Corbett 2018). Despite these pedagogical developments, educators often encounter challenges when teaching

entrepreneurship to technically oriented students. Students from disciplines such as engineering, software development, and computer science frequently prioritise product development when conceptualising entrepreneurial success. For many such students, the technical quality of a product appears to be the primary determinant of its success.

However, entrepreneurship research consistently highlights the importance of communication and persuasion in entrepreneurial practice. Entrepreneurs must persuade investors, convince customers, and communicate visions that inspire collaborators and partners. The ability to articulate a compelling value proposition is therefore central to entrepreneurial success (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001). Investor decisions nevertheless reflect both presentation and substance: delivery can influence initial interest, while product, market, and financial considerations remain central to investment judgements (Clark 2008). Helping technically oriented students recognise the importance of communication can be difficult through traditional teaching approaches. Students may intellectually understand the importance of pitching but still prioritise technical development when confronted with practical tasks. Games-based learning offers a promising approach by embedding communication directly into gameplay and making persuasive communication consequential.

This paper examines the use of a simple gameplay activity designed to foreground entrepreneurial communication within an undergraduate entrepreneurship module. The activity challenges student teams to design a paper aircraft prototype and subsequently deliver a persuasive pitch explaining its value. The study therefore explores how such gameplay activities reveal student assumptions about entrepreneurial success and how these assumptions are challenged through experiential learning.

2. Games-based Learning and Experiential Entrepreneurship Education

Games-based learning has become an increasingly prominent topic within higher education research (O'Brien and Costin 2023). Educational games are typically defined as structured activities that combine rules, goals, feedback mechanisms, and competition in order to facilitate learning (Garris et al. 2002). These elements create environments in which learners engage actively with problems rather than passively receiving information.

One of the key theoretical foundations of games-based learning lies in experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) proposed that learning occurs through a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Games naturally support this cycle by providing participants with experiences that generate immediate feedback, encouraging reflection and the development of new strategies.

Research has shown that games-based learning can improve student engagement and motivation, particularly when activities involve collaboration and competition (Wouters et al. 2013). By transforming learning into an interactive process, games encourage students to experiment with ideas and reflect on the consequences of their actions. Within entrepreneurship education, experiential learning approaches have become widely accepted as essential pedagogical tools. Entrepreneurship involves recognising opportunities, mobilising resources, and persuading stakeholders, all of which require practical experience rather than purely theoretical knowledge (Fayolle 2013). Consequently, entrepreneurship programmes increasingly incorporate experiential teaching methods such as startup simulations, innovation challenges, and pitching competitions (Neck et al. 2014). These activities allow students to practice entrepreneurial behaviours in environments that simulate real-world conditions. However, many entrepreneurship games prioritise strategic or financial decision-making, often overlooking the communicative dimension of entrepreneurial practice. While these aspects are important, communication and value articulation remain comparatively underemphasised.

Entrepreneurial communication involves persuading stakeholders that an innovation creates value. Entrepreneurs construct narratives explaining the problem being addressed, the proposed solution, and the benefits created (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001). Effective pitches must be both plausible and resonant, and the rhetorical strategies available to founders may vary with the venture's stage of product development (van Werven et al. 2019). For technically oriented students, this communicative dimension may initially appear secondary to product development. Educational programmes in engineering and software development frequently emphasise analytical problem-solving and technical optimisation (Rae 2010). Games that combine prototype development with persuasive pitching therefore provide opportunities to recognise how communication shapes the perception of innovation.

Pitching is also a learnable entrepreneurial practice rather than a superficial final-stage performance. Field research shows that pitch training can improve pitch content and stimulate continued entrepreneurial learning, although incorporating feedback may temporarily disrupt delivery (Clingsmith et al. 2023). This evidence

complicates any simple claim that communication outweighs product quality: persuasive delivery matters, but it must communicate a credible opportunity grounded in product, market, and financial substance (Clark 2008; van Werven et al. 2019). Entrepreneurship pedagogy should therefore integrate communication with venture development rather than position the two as competing alternatives.

3. Teaching Context

The activity was implemented in an undergraduate entrepreneurship elective within an Irish software development degree. The module introduces technically oriented students, many with limited prior business education, to opportunity recognition, value propositions, customer discovery and entrepreneurial communication through experiential learning.

Introduced before formal teaching on pitching and value propositions, the game surfaces assumptions about entrepreneurial success and provides a shared reference point for later discussion. Its collaborative format supports participation, while basic materials keep attention on behaviour and communication rather than technology.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, practice-based case study approach to examine how a gameplay activity can support learning in entrepreneurial communication. Practice-based research is widely used in entrepreneurship education to explore pedagogical innovations within authentic classroom settings (Fayolle 2013; Neck and Corbett 2018). Rather than attempting to isolate causal relationships through controlled experimentation, the study examines recurring behavioural patterns within a structured classroom activity.

The research design focuses on a recurring classroom exercise implemented across four annual cohorts within an undergraduate entrepreneurship elective delivered in a software development programme. The activity combines prototyping, teamwork, and pitching to simulate aspects of entrepreneurial practice. The cohort-level implementation, rather than the individual student, is the principal unit of comparison. The analysis therefore considers patterns recurring across four classroom cases rather than treating the 48 participating students as independent observations.

4.2 Participants

Across four annual iterations of the module, approximately 12 students participated in each cohort, involving 48 students in total. Students were organised into teams of three to four and completed the activity during a single class session lasting approximately two hours. The activity was introduced early in the semester to surface existing assumptions about entrepreneurial success before formal instruction on entrepreneurial communication and value propositions.

4.3 Activity Design

The activity was adapted from the Airplane Contest exercise described by Neck et al. (2014). It requires students to combine rapid prototyping with persuasive communication.

Students work in teams to design a paper aircraft prototype capable of carrying a coin across a designated distance before pitching the concept to a panel of judges acting as investors.

The activity is structured into five stages (see Table 1):

Table 1: Stages of the Airplane Storytelling Game

Stage	Description of Activity	Time
Ideation & Design	Teams develop a concept for an <i>"airplane of the future"</i> and construct a paper prototype.	40 min
Prototype Testing	Teams test whether their aircraft can successfully complete the required flight distance while carrying a coin.	20 min
Pitch Preparation	Teams prepare a short investor pitch explaining the concept and the value it creates for customers.	20 min
Pitch Presentation	Teams present their pitch to judges who evaluate the concept and select the winning design.	25 min

Stage	Description of Activity	Time
Reflection & Discussion	Students participate in a facilitated reflection discussing the activity outcomes and the importance of pitching and value communication in entrepreneurship.	15 min

Students must design an aircraft capable of carrying a coin across a fixed distance before being eligible to present their pitch.

The exercise requires teams to consider how their design creates value for customers, encouraging them to articulate the functional, emotional, and societal benefits of their concept.

Importantly, the activity explicitly requires that *all team members participate in the pitch*, reinforcing the collaborative nature of entrepreneurial communication.

4.4 Learning Objectives

The activity was designed to support learning in three key areas:

1. Entrepreneurial communication and pitching
2. Team coordination and decision-making
3. Balancing technical development with value articulation

The exercise reflects the pedagogical assumption that entrepreneurial competence emerges through active engagement with entrepreneurial tasks rather than through theoretical instruction alone (Neck et al. 2014).

By combining a physical prototyping challenge with a persuasive pitching task, the activity creates a situation in which both technical and communicative competencies are required for success.

4.5 Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using three complementary sources:

Lecturer observations

The instructor recorded contemporaneous observation notes following each iteration of the activity. These notes focused on student behaviour during the different stages, including how teams allocated effort, how roles emerged, and how pitches were prepared. The notes did not involve systematic time tracking of individual teams; judgements about relative time allocation were therefore qualitative.

Student reflections and informal feedback

Immediately following the activity, students participated in a short reflective discussion focusing on the lessons they derived from the exercise. Informal student comments during these discussions were recorded in teaching notes.

Reflective teaching notes

The instructor maintained reflective notes across the four cohorts documenting recurring patterns observed during the activity, including common student misconceptions and behavioural tendencies.

This multi-source approach supported comparison of recurring patterns across the four cohort-level implementations.

4.6 Data Analysis

The analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. Observation notes, recorded student comments and reflective teaching notes were read repeatedly, with recurring observations grouped and compared within and across the four cohorts.

Three recurring themes emerged:

- how teams allocated time between prototype development and pitch preparation
- the relationship between prototype performance and pitch success
- student reactions when technically strong prototypes were outperformed by persuasive presentations

Comparing the four cohort-level implementations allowed the study to identify recurring behavioural patterns in how teams approached entrepreneurial challenges requiring both technical and communicative competencies.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

No formal assessment data or identifiable student records were used; analysis was conducted at aggregate cohort level.

5. Findings

The activity was implemented across four annual cohorts between 2022 and 2025, with approximately 12 students per cohort and 48 participants in total. Teams of three to four completed the two-hour session. Findings are reported as recurring cohort- and team-level patterns rather than as independent individual observations.

Data comprised lecturer observation notes, recorded post-activity comments and reflective teaching notes. The analysis sought qualitative patterns in how technically oriented teams balanced technical and communicative tasks.

5.1 Allocation of Time and Effort

Despite equal weighting, most teams devoted substantially more effort to aircraft refinement. Students repeatedly tested folds, wing structures and weight distribution, often using the full design period, while pitch preparation began late and was frequently improvised. Teams were not systematically timed, so this is interpreted as a qualitative pattern; it nevertheless indicates a recurring preference for engineering optimisation over communication strategy.

5.2 Prototype Performance

The technical performance of the aircraft prototypes varied considerably between teams. Some designs demonstrated impressive flight stability and successfully completed the required flight distance during testing. These teams often invested significant effort experimenting with aerodynamic structures and weight distribution.

Other prototypes performed poorly, often due to overly complex folding structures or uneven weight distribution. In several cases teams had to redesign their aircraft during the prototype testing stage after initial designs failed to achieve the required distance. Despite these differences in technical performance, prototype success did not consistently predict the outcome of the pitching stage. While technically effective designs were sometimes rewarded, the persuasive quality of the pitch frequently played a decisive role in determining which teams were perceived as most successful. This finding reinforced the central pedagogical objective of the exercise: demonstrating that product functionality alone does not guarantee entrepreneurial success.

5.3 Pitching Performance

Significant variation was observed in the quality of student pitches. Some teams delivered structured presentations that clearly articulated the problem their aircraft addressed, the value it created for customers, and the reasons why their solution was superior to competing designs. These teams frequently incorporated storytelling elements, framing their aircraft as part of a broader solution for the future of air travel. Other teams focused primarily on describing technical features of the aircraft design without clearly articulating a compelling value proposition. These presentations often lacked narrative coherence and failed to connect technical characteristics with meaningful customer benefits.

In several cases, teams with simpler aircraft designs delivered persuasive pitches that clearly communicated the advantages of their concept. These teams frequently achieved higher evaluation scores than teams with technically superior prototypes but weaker presentations. This outcome was particularly striking for students who had assumed that the technical quality of the prototype would determine success.

5.4 Student Reactions

One of the most significant learning moments occurred during the judging phase of the activity.

When teams that had invested substantial effort in technical refinement were outperformed by teams with stronger presentations, students frequently expressed surprise. Comments during post-activity discussions revealed that many participants had expected prototype performance to be the dominant evaluation criterion.

Illustrative comments recorded in the teaching notes included:

"We spent most of our time getting the plane perfect but didn't think enough about the pitch."

"Their plane wasn't actually better than ours, but their explanation made it sound better."

These reactions indicate that the activity successfully challenged students' assumptions about the relative importance of product development and communication in entrepreneurial contexts.

5.5 Emergent Team Roles

Another pattern observed during the activity involved the distribution of roles within teams.

During the prototype development phase, technically confident students often assumed leadership roles related to aircraft design and testing. Other team members typically adopted supporting roles, assisting with folding, testing, and adjusting the aircraft.

However, during the pitching phase, leadership within teams frequently shifted. Students with stronger communication skills often assumed responsibility for presenting the concept, while technically focused students took on more limited speaking roles. This shift highlighted the multidimensional nature of entrepreneurial capability, illustrating that successful entrepreneurial teams require both technical expertise and effective communication.

5.6 Reflection and Learning

The activity concluded with a short reflective discussion in which students were asked to consider what factors determined success in the challenge. Across all four cohorts, students consistently identified communication and storytelling as key factors influencing the outcome of the competition. Many participants acknowledged that they had underestimated the importance of persuasive communication when allocating their time and effort during the activity. This reflective discussion reinforced the experiential learning process. Rather than being instructed that pitching matters in entrepreneurship, students encountered the consequences of neglecting communication during the gameplay activity itself. As a result, the activity served as a powerful demonstration of the role of persuasion, narrative, and value articulation in entrepreneurial practice.

6. Discussion: Experiential Learning Through Gameplay

The findings of this study highlight an important pedagogical tension within entrepreneurship education, particularly when working with technically oriented students. Across four cohorts, students consistently prioritised technical refinement of their prototype over preparation of their investor pitch. Despite being informed that the prototype and pitch carried equal weighting in the evaluation process, most teams devoted the majority of their time and effort to improving the technical performance of their aircraft. This behavioural pattern suggests that many students implicitly equate entrepreneurial success primarily with product quality rather than with the ability to communicate and articulate value effectively.

This tendency is understandable given the disciplinary background of the students involved in the study. Students enrolled in software development programmes are typically trained to focus on optimisation, functionality, and technical performance. Within these disciplines, success is often measured through the effectiveness of a technical solution rather than through the ability to communicate its value to external stakeholders. As a result, when presented with a challenge involving both prototype development and persuasive pitching, students frequently prioritise the technical aspects of the task.

However, entrepreneurship research consistently emphasises the central role of persuasion and narrative in entrepreneurial practice. Entrepreneurs must convince investors, attract customers, and inspire collaborators to support their ideas. The ability to construct and communicate a compelling value proposition therefore influences whether innovations gain traction (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; van Werven et al. 2019). At the same time, communication should not be understood as a substitute for venture quality. Research on business-angel decisions shows that presentation can shape initial interest, while substantive criteria concerning the product, market, company, and finance remain important to investors' stated judgements (Clark 2008). The pedagogical issue is therefore not communication over product, but the need to make technical value clear, credible, and relevant to stakeholders.

Although students were aware that the pitch formed part of the evaluation process, competition outcomes frequently contradicted their expectations. In several cases, teams with technically stronger aircraft were outperformed by teams that delivered clearer and more persuasive pitches. These results generated surprise,

particularly among teams that had invested heavily in prototype optimisation. The discrepancy between expectations and outcomes becomes the central learning mechanism within the activity. The gameplay structure creates a form of experiential misalignment in which assumptions about what determines success are challenged. This does not establish that communication is more important than product quality in entrepreneurship generally; rather, it demonstrates that technical value cannot influence an audience unless it is communicated persuasively.

The reflective discussion that follows the activity encourages reflective observation, allowing students to analyse why certain teams were more successful than others and reconsider the assumptions that guided their behaviour during the game. Many students recognise during this stage that they allocated insufficient time to developing their pitch or articulating a clear value proposition. In this sense, the gameplay experience becomes a catalyst for reflection on the broader dynamics of entrepreneurial practice.

This learning process aligns closely with experiential learning theory. According to Kolb (1984), learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The gameplay activity mirrors this cycle by placing students in a situation where they must make decisions, observe the consequences of those decisions, and subsequently reflect on their assumptions.

The design and construction of the aircraft prototype represent the stage of concrete experience, during which students engage directly with the challenge of developing a technical solution. The judging phase of the competition provides immediate feedback on the effectiveness of the team's decisions. When teams observe that persuasive communication influences the outcome of the competition, they begin to question the assumptions that shaped their earlier decisions. Through reflective discussion, students move toward abstract conceptualisation, recognising that entrepreneurial success depends not only on the quality of a product but also on the ability to communicate its value effectively. Rather than being told that pitching matters in entrepreneurship, students experience the consequences of neglecting communication through the outcomes of the gameplay activity itself.

The findings suggest that simple gameplay activities can help students recognise the multidimensional nature of entrepreneurial capability. By combining prototype development with persuasive pitching, the activity encourages students to recognise that successful entrepreneurship requires both technical expertise and effective communication. Gameplay activities can therefore act as pedagogical mechanisms that surface implicit assumptions about entrepreneurial success and allow these assumptions to be challenged through experiential learning. In this case, the imbalance between prototype development and pitch preparation becomes the mechanism through which learning occurs.

7. Implications for Entrepreneurship Educators

The findings suggest five implications for educators. First, activities can expose implicit assumptions by making the consequences of students' choices visible. Second, pitching and storytelling should be embedded within experiential tasks rather than treated as secondary to product development. Third, time pressure can reveal how students prioritise competing demands and provide material for debriefing. Fourth, shifting team roles can help students recognise the value of complementary technical and communicative capabilities. Finally, effective GBL does not require sophisticated technology: simple physical challenges can generate rich learning when competition, feedback and reflection are carefully structured.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While the findings of this study provide useful insights into the pedagogical potential of games-based learning, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study comprises four annual cohorts within a single programme. Although 48 students participated in total, these do not constitute 48 independent qualitative cases; the principal comparisons are between four cohort-level implementations. The findings therefore reflect a particular disciplinary and institutional context. Replication in other programmes would help determine whether similar patterns emerge across different student groups.

Secondly, the analysis relies on observation notes, reflective teaching records, and informal student comments rather than systematic quantitative measures. In particular, teams' time allocation was not formally timed, so claims concerning prototype emphasis are qualitative judgements. Future studies could use structured

observation schedules, independent time tracking, surveys, or reflective journals to examine the pattern more systematically.

Thirdly, the activity is a short classroom intervention rather than a longitudinal measure of learning. Future research could examine whether repeated gameplay changes students' later pitching behaviour, value propositions, or venture-development decisions.

Fourthly, the instructor designed, facilitated, and judged the activity and was also the sole analyst of the classroom records. This dual role creates a risk of expectancy and confirmation bias. Future research should incorporate independent judges or observers, multiple analysts, and explicit coding procedures to strengthen credibility and reduce dependence on practitioner interpretation.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates how a simple gameplay activity can generate meaningful insights into student behaviour and learning within entrepreneurship education.

9. Conclusion

This paper examined a prototype-to-pitch game used with four cohorts of technically oriented students. Despite equal weighting, teams consistently prioritised aircraft refinement and under-prepared their pitches. When stronger presentations outperformed technically superior prototypes, students were prompted to reconsider the role of storytelling, value articulation and persuasion.

The activity does not suggest that communication substitutes for product quality. Rather, it reveals entrepreneurial capability as multidimensional: technical value must be communicated clearly to influence stakeholders. For technically oriented students, the game's experiential misalignment makes this relationship visible rather than merely explaining it.

Simple, low-technology gameplay can therefore provide a replicable mechanism for teaching entrepreneurial communication. Its value lies in combining action, consequential feedback and facilitated reflection, helping students reconsider assumptions about entrepreneurial success and apply the insight to later pitching and venture-development tasks.

Ethics Declaration: This study was conducted as part of normal teaching practice. Under the institution's guidelines, formal ethical clearance was not required because no formal assessment data or identifiable personal data were collected for research purposes. Classroom observations, reflective teaching notes and anonymised student comments were analysed only at aggregate cohort level.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language editing, proofreading, and clarification of wording. All substantive intellectual contributions, analysis, and final decisions regarding the content of the paper were made by the authors.

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