

Gamified & Inclusive Entrepreneurship Learning

Playground for Entrepreneurs, Netherlands

This case study presents the "Playground for Entrepreneurs," an innovative, gamified, and inclusive learning tool developed in the Netherlands to support early-stage entrepreneurial exploration. The initiative addresses common barriers in entrepreneurship education, such as limited access to quality coaching and the need for experiential, reflective learning environments. The Playground consists of a board game and an AI-powered web application (in development), both designed to foster curiosity, teamwork, and meaningful feedback among participants. Used in higher education, incubators, and community programs worldwide, the tool enables participants to collaboratively explore entrepreneurial ideas, receive constructive feedback, and develop actionable insights. Key impacts include enhanced reflection, community building, and pedagogical innovation, with adaptability across diverse educational contexts. The Playground's evolution toward digital platforms ensures scalability, sustainability, and continued alignment with the HEInnovate framework for entrepreneurship education.



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HEInnovate dimensions



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Background and Institutional Context

Playground for Entrepreneurs is a **small, innovation-driven organisation** from the Netherlands dedicated to designing experiential **learning tools that support the exploration phase of entrepreneurship**. Founded in 2021, its mission is to make entrepreneurial discovery accessible, engaging, and reflective for educators, coaches, and learners.

Founded and led by Inge de Dreu, Playground for Entrepreneurs emerged from the recognition that early-stage entrepreneurs often lack affordable, structured, and stimulating tools to explore and validate ideas. Likewise, instructors in the upcoming field of entrepreneurship education often lack experience or resources to teach this subject effectively.

The **Playground for Entrepreneurs** initiative offers the **Entrepreneurship Coach Certification**. It is a professional training programme designed to equip coaches, educators, and entrepreneurship facilitators with practical skills and methods to support and empower entrepreneurs. Through a structured series of interactive sessions, participants develop hands-on coaching techniques, facilitation tools, and gamified approaches that foster entrepreneurial mindsets, strengthen decision-making, and support sustainable business development. Graduates receive a **Certificate of Completion** and gain access to a global network of entrepreneurship professionals and learning resources.

Over time, **facilitators from around the world**¹ have been trained, applying its methodologies in universities, incubators, and community programmes. To date, around 70 facilitators have completed the training, including approximately ten from European Union countries. These trained facilitators form an international community, illustrating the model's adaptability and intercultural relevance. In some cases, individual educators or consultants use the Playground for Entrepreneurs; in others, university incubators implement the approach by integrating it into their activities or by training several staff members and educators to use the game.

Playground for Entrepreneurs currently offers two main tools:

- **The Playground for Entrepreneurs Board Game** – a serious game designed to stimulate reflection, feedback, and collaborative learning around early-stage entrepreneurial ideas.

¹ Including members from China, India, Uganda, Romania, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Canada, the United States, and several Latin American countries.

- **Playground AI Web Application (in development)** – an AI-enhanced digital version that extends access beyond physical sessions, enabling remote participants and personalised exploration.

Both tools **foster curiosity, teamwork, and meaningful connection** among participants, while promoting a reflective mindset central to entrepreneurship education and innovation.

Rationale

Barriers to Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Guidance

Across the world, entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted as a key competence within education and economic development. However, access to early-stage entrepreneurial guidance remains limited. Many aspiring entrepreneurs face challenges such as:

- **Limited availability and affordability of professional coaching.** Quality coaching is not always accessible, especially outside major cities. Sometimes coaches lack a structured method and rely solely on their own experience. Even when good coaching is available, if it is outside a government, university or NGO-supported programme, it is often extremely expensive for an early phase, often bootstrapped or student-led venture.
- **Restricted capacity of incubators and entrepreneurship programmes**, that cannot serve all interested participants. They also may have eligibility requirements which limit access.
- **Rapid expansion of entrepreneurship education**, sometimes outpacing the pedagogical training of educators. As this is an upcoming field there are many interpretations of what it should include. This counts especially for secondary education, and to a lesser extent also higher education. Some educators focus on personal finance, others on administration, and some on entirely different topics. In these contexts, it is difficult to find educators who have a solid understanding of current entrepreneurship methods, as teachers rarely have entrepreneurial experience or background in its methods.

Concluding, the quality of entrepreneurship coaching and education may vary and is not always accessible.

Rationale: Turning Entrepreneurial Theory into Collaborative Practice

The Playground for Entrepreneurs guides instructors with limited knowledge and experience, whereas it provides a hook to go deeper into the material to experienced coaches. They can support participants more efficiently, as elements of the one-on-one

coaching can be replaced by gameplay that turns into a group mentoring session. It also provides a playful, yet structured approach to entrepreneurship classes, introductory events and workshops. Furthermore, the Playground for Entrepreneurs can build a **sense of community** between participants very quickly. This constructive and collaborative community provides an additional layer of support for starting entrepreneurs, complementing coaching and mentoring.

Using the Playground board game, participants gain personal insights, while also learning about entrepreneurship in general. The initiative aims to **empower students, educators, and early-stage entrepreneurs** to explore ideas in a guided yet playful environment, lowering entry barriers to entrepreneurial learning. The rationale behind the project integrates **gamification** as a bridge between theory and practice. By embedding established entrepreneurship frameworks into a game format, participants can experience and internalise abstract principles through direct engagement.

The design is inspired by:

- **Customer Development (Blank, 2005)** – emphasising learning from potential users early in the process.
- **Lean Startup (Ries, 2011)** – encouraging rapid experimentation and iteration.
- **Effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001)** – focusing on action under uncertainty with available resources.

By combining these frameworks, the **Playground** transforms theoretical understanding into **collaborative, reflective, and experiential learning**. Ultimately, the project's rationale is to enable anyone—regardless of background or resources—to explore entrepreneurial opportunities and connect meaningfully with peers, fostering inclusion, creativity, and community building.

Initiative Description

The **Playground for Entrepreneurs board game** is a serious game with a purpose beyond entertainment designed to facilitate guided reflection on early-stage entrepreneurial ideas. It has been implemented by educators and coaches globally, in contexts ranging from startup accelerators to university entrepreneurship courses and is offered as a commercially available tool for institutions and practitioners.

Use Cases of the Playground in Higher Education Institutions

At higher education institutions, the Playground usually fits in the Entrepreneurship Centre or University Incubator or with individual educators. It is used in several contexts. Firstly, entrepreneurship educators pick the board and apply it in their classes as an experiential

exercise. Secondly, on open days or introductory meetings, meant to motivate students to take an interest in entrepreneurship, the Playground is used as a workshop tool to share knowledge and create a community. Thirdly, the Playground is used as a tool for group mentoring for teams, that are already participating in a programme or are otherwise connected to the Entrepreneurship Centre.

Gameplay and Format

The core of the Playground for Entrepreneurs gameplay is its **constructive feedback dynamic**. While its three main principles are safeguarded, the game dynamics can take endless variations depending on the profile of the participants, the objectives of the facilitator, the setting and context of the session. The main task of the facilitator is to maintain a safe space for the participants to discuss their thoughts.



General gameplay involves **one facilitator** and **3–6 participants**. Each participant brings an idea or project to explore. The game is composed of four boards divided into different thematic areas (human connection, listening to your customers, observe customers and competitors & conducting marketing experiments and prototyping) with each 12 questions, question tiles, a dice, a sand timer, reward cards and a note sheet for capturing reflections and action items.

The board game has **three main principles**:

1. **No right or wrong answers**, all thoughts and stories are valid.
2. **Feedback** can take any shape – stories, questions and advice
3. **Equal amount of attention** for all participants; that is why a timer is used.

Participants need to bring **their entrepreneurial idea** into the game; this is the only requirement regarding its state of progress. Participants take turns responding to reflective questions that encourage them to share their thoughts about their entrepreneurial style and the state of their project. Peers provide constructive feedback—stories, questions, or advice. There are **no right or wrong answers**, only stories to tell and perspectives to share. After each round, participants award a *reward card* to the most inspiring contributor.

At the end of a session, **participants summarise their key takeaways** and **action priorities**, identifying gaps for further exploration. If anything is left unsaid during the feedback period, participants may pass each other notes or connect after the session during a casual moment.

The strengths of this type of gameplay are that all participants gain new insights, contribute to each other's process, and often realise that their challenges are not unique. As a **cooperative game**, participants do not compete for prizes; instead, they help each other progress to a higher level. Participants often report that giving feedback improves their self-confidence and leaves them with a positive feeling. Building community in entrepreneurial contexts also fosters shared resilience.

Capability & Preparation

Settings in which the Playground for Entrepreneurs is used include workshops, group coaching sessions, entrepreneurship classes and introductory events. The general playing dynamic may be adjusted to the particular setting and context, as well as individual facilitators' preferences. It is important to keep the core principles of the game: equal time, no right or wrong answers, and open-ended discussion.

Facilitators may or may not be trained. Sometimes the previous experience of the facilitator provides enough background to facilitate the game, and they may just familiarise themselves with the rules and dynamics. For those who are less experienced with entrepreneurship methods, the game (particularly the questions) provides a helpful guide. However, in terms of facilitator feedback, the tool will only ever be as good as the facilitator, and more training in entrepreneurship methods may be valuable.

Classroom Setting

Using the Playground in regular classroom settings can be challenging due to limited class time. As a result, educators often adapt the game into shorter, repeatable activities. The tool works particularly well in project-based entrepreneurship courses, where students can regularly return to their ideas.

The class is typically divided into small groups (4–8 students), ensuring that only one or two members of the same project team are in each group. Students take turns answering reflective questions and providing peer feedback, following the same core game principles (equal time, no right or wrong answers, open-ended discussion).

To deepen reflection, educators often assign feedback roles such as those inspired by De Bono's Thinking Hats, helping students practice constructive critique from different perspectives. At the end of the activity, teachers highlight key insights and connect the game discussions to course concepts, ensuring that experiential learning links back to curricular content.

A **practical example comes** from students at Avans University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands who were involved in [FermiChem research projects](#), primarily working on biological, chemical, or sustainability-related topics. Although most participants were not

business students, an entrepreneurship module was embedded into their project activities to raise awareness of potential ventures emerging from their research. The Playground was used after the students' final pitches as a more informal and reflective format to consolidate newly acquired entrepreneurship skills. Despite their non-business background, students showed high levels of **engagement** and demonstrated a solid **understanding of core entrepreneurial concepts**, while gaining new insights into their project opportunities and future career choices.

An additional learning moment occurred when a student from another discipline approached the group to discuss his own entrepreneurial idea. After the interaction, participants were able to clearly identify gaps in his interview approach and suggest how deeper insights could have been obtained. This illustrates how the game supports not only knowledge acquisition but also the direct **application of entrepreneurial thinking** and **peer feedback**.

Educational Method & Didactics

Facilitators (teachers/professors) at higher education institutions play a dual role as **moderators and mentors**. They ensure that time is respected, conversation remains constructive, and psychological safety is maintained. This reflective dialogue helps participants deepen their insights while learning to give and receive feedback effectively.

For educators, the Playground can be integrated into class sessions or adapted into short modules of 15–20 minutes to support class dynamics.

- Applying **feedback frameworks** such as *de Bono's Thinking Hats* (1985) to structure reflection.
- Embedding sessions into **entrepreneurship programmes** focused on ideation and business model validation.

Workshop Setting

Another way of integrating the Playground can be offered through one-time workshop formats facilitated by trained practitioners. The Playground fits naturally into entrepreneurship workshops focused on opportunity exploration, customer discovery, or business model development. It complements commonly used frameworks such as Lean Startup (Ries, 2011) and Effectual Thinking (Sarasvathy, 2001), making learning more personal and experiential.

Workshops typically use small groups of 2–6 participants, and it is helpful for each participant to have an idea to work on. If not, a brief brainstorming exercise can be added.

Game sessions should remain under two hours to ensure meaningful insights without overwhelming participants, with note sheets used to capture key takeaways.

Depending on group size, facilitators may run sessions alone or with assistants who help manage timing and group flow. When experienced entrepreneurs are present, participants can guide much of the feedback themselves; with less experienced groups, assigning feedback roles can strengthen the discussion. The main facilitator can move between groups to observe themes and address them in a short plenary discussion.

Group Mentoring Setting – Incubation

The Playground for Entrepreneurs is a great tool for coaches and student incubators to make their services more cost-effective. Much of the essence of entrepreneurship in an early stage can be learned, applied and shared together with (student) entrepreneurs. The Playground facilitates this conversation in a playful way.

Whilst playing repetitively, one of the most important outcomes of every session will be a to-do list for each participant. Right after the session, the coach can have the participants prioritise their to-do's; ensuring they recognise that the most important issue is going to be addressed first. When participants come in next time, they can start by sharing what they have done since their last session, as well as their results. This reflection exercise supports progress and sharing it with the other participants creates accountability and ownership. The coach can even offer small perks for the participants who have done their homework thoroughly, stimulating compliance.

One **example from a university incubator setting** illustrates this approach. In this context, the Playground was used through repetitive gameplay to **strengthen community** and **stimulate progress** over time. Participants from the same cohort regularly gave each other feedback and provided mutual support. In addition, the to-do list generated during gameplay offered facilitators a simple and effective way to follow up on participants' progress and emerging insights.

Learning Outcomes

Participants frequently report valuable insights such as:

- Identifying knowledge gaps (e.g., insufficient understanding of competitors).
- Generating new marketing or collaboration ideas.
- Adjusting prototypes or MVPs based on group feedback.
- Acknowledging progress and milestones in their entrepreneurial journey.

From a participant's perspective, feedback from both participants and facilitators indicates that the game creates an engaging and supportive environment for exploring

entrepreneurial ideas. Well-designed questions prompt deeper reflection, while peer discussions lead to new perspectives and practical insights. Many participants report gaining clearer direction for their projects and recognising aspects they might otherwise overlook.

From a facilitation perspective, the format encourages meaningful exchanges and supports both early-stage exploration and more advanced entrepreneurial learning. New facilitators benefit from a structured guide, while experienced educators use the questions as springboards for deeper coaching.

Success Factors, Impacts, and Lessons Learned

The **Playground for Entrepreneurs** primarily targets the *exploration phase*—a critical yet often overlooked stage of entrepreneurship education. Its impact is visible across individual, community, and institutional levels.

Key Impacts

- **Enhanced Reflection and Learning:** Participants gain a clearer understanding of their ideas, identifying missing information and next steps.
- **Community Building:** The cooperative structure encourages peer support and empathy, counteracting entrepreneurial isolation.
- **Pedagogical Innovation:** Educators use the game to translate abstract entrepreneurship theories into tangible experiences.
- **Global Accessibility:** The simplicity and adaptability of the tool allow implementation across cultures, languages, and educational levels.

Success Factors

- **Open Exploration:** The absence of right or wrong answers promotes curiosity and experimentation.
- **Psychological Safety:** A respectful, non-judgmental environment supports honest reflection.
- **Facilitator Guidance:** Skilled moderation ensures depth and quality of discussion, which is particularly necessary with a student or otherwise inexperienced audience.
- **Adaptability:** The game can scale from classroom activities to community incubator sessions.

Playground AI is currently (February 2026) in an MVP stage, already live with an accessible free tier and early engagement from around 75 users, including student groups, while ongoing adjustments and development continue to strengthen its value and functionality.

The Playground's cooperative, feedback-driven format turns entrepreneurship into a shared learning experience—an exercise in creativity, empathy, and continuous discovery.

Lessons Learned

The development of the Playground for Entrepreneurs evolved through several stages and involved extensive collaboration with coaches and educators. Their feedback helped refine the game's structure and contributed significantly to the quality of the reflective questions, which are frequently highlighted by both participants and facilitators.

Some students initially struggle with the open, personalised nature of experiential learning, especially when they are used to highly structured classroom formats. However, once they recognise the practical value and personal relevance, their perception typically shifts.

A recurring challenge is limited organisational support. While educators see the Playground as a pedagogical tool, managers sometimes perceive it as "just a game". Budget cuts and institutional restructuring have also made it more difficult to introduce new experiential learning tools in some universities.

Outlook and Sustainability

The next step in this journey is **Playground AI**, an **AI-powered digital platform** that extends the board game's core philosophy into a scalable, data-informed environment. This web application maintains the reflective and collaborative essence of the physical game while introducing new capabilities:

- **Remote accessibility** – participants can join from anywhere, at any time.
- **Personalised learning paths** – AI-tailored questions and prompts based on user progress.
- **Enhanced facilitation tools** – automatic insights and feedback summaries assist educators and coaches.
- **Community continuity** – participants remain connected after sessions, forming ongoing learning networks.

Through a hybrid (board + AI) model, Playground for Entrepreneurs strengthens its long-term viability and reach:

- **Sustainability:** Easy updates, digital integration, and reuse across courses and programs.
- **Scalability:** Supports simultaneous implementation across institutions and countries.
- **Transferability:** Minimal infrastructure requirements allow replication in varied contexts.

This evolution ensures that the Playground can continue to respond to changing

educational needs while remaining accessible and adaptable.

Conclusions

The Playground for Entrepreneurs demonstrates how serious games can bridge the gap between theory and practice in **entrepreneurship education**. It shows that play, reflection, and dialogue can stimulate meaningful learning while lowering entry barriers to entrepreneurial exploration.

Key conclusions from this case include:

- Gamified learning enhances engagement and deepens understanding of complex entrepreneurial principles.
- The approach democratises access to entrepreneurial exploration for students, educators, and communities.
- The format fosters social connection, self-awareness, and an entrepreneurial mindset.
- The model is flexible, culturally adaptable, and transferable across educational contexts.

Together, these elements position Playground for Entrepreneurs as a strong example of inclusive, experiential entrepreneurship education **aligned with the HEInnovate framework**.

Contact Details and Resources

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Resources

Links

- [Game instructions](#)
- [Playground for Entrepreneurs Creation Story 1: Customer Discovery \(blogpost\)](#)
- [Playground for Entrepreneurs Creation Story 2: Not Another Canvas \(blogpost\)](#)
- [Playground for Entrepreneurs Creation Story 3: Game on! \(blogpost\)](#)
- [Testimonials and Resources \(available on website\)](#)

Theoretical Background

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Sarasvathy, S. D. (2001). Causation and effectuation: Toward a theoretical shift from economic inevitability to entrepreneurial contingency. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 243–263.