Collegiate Aviation Review International

Volume 43 | Issue 2 Proceedings of the 2025 UAA Annual Conference, Article #8

12-05-2025

Enhancing Private Pilot Training Readiness through Virtual Reality: Utah Valley University's Experience Integrating VR Simulation into the Private Pilot Ground Course

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Flight training programs across the aviation industry continue to face high attrition rates, with FAA and industry estimates indicating that as many as 40 to 60 percent of student pilots leave training before earning their Private Pilot Certificate. To help address this challenge, Utah Valley University (UVU) introduced a Virtual Reality (VR) flight simulation program for students enrolled in the Private Pilot Ground Course who had not yet begun their flight training. The program was designed to give students early, hands-on exposure to flight concepts and cockpit procedures in an immersive environment. This study explores how VR-based pre-flight training influences student preparedness, confidence, and later success in flight training. Early findings from student feedback and performance data show clear advantages—students reported stronger understanding of key concepts, greater procedural familiarity, and higher overall confidence entering flight training.

Recommended Citation:
Cornell, J. (2025). Enhancing private pilot training readiness through virtual reality: Utah Valley University's experience integrating VR simulation into the private pilot ground course. *Collegiate Aviation Review International, 43*(2), pending. Retrieved from http://ojs.library.okstate.edu/osu/index.php/CARI/article/view/10455/9198

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to explore whether introducing flight concepts early through virtual reality (VR) simulations in the Private Pilot Ground Course at Utah Valley University can help students feel more prepared, confident, and ready for actual flight training. Specifically, this research asks: Does learning through VR improve the success and performance of UVU Private Pilot Ground students compared to traditional instruction alone? This research is ongoing and will provide an overview of current findings and future expectations.

Introduction

The aviation industry continues to face challenges with student retention, training efficiency, and overall success in flight programs. According to the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA, 2010), roughly 40–50% of student pilots in the United States do not complete their training or earn a Private Pilot Certificate, meaning many drop out while still at the student pilot level. At the same time, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA, 2023) highlights the growing demand for professional pilots, making it clear that the industry must find ways to train more pilots efficiently while managing high attrition rates and rising costs. These challenges underline the need for new, cost-effective approaches that are proven to support student success and satisfaction in pilot training programs.

At Utah Valley University (UVU), the School of Aviation Sciences is addressing this issue by incorporating VR simulation into the Private Pilot Ground Knowledge Course. UVU recently revised its flight training approach, now requiring students to successfully complete the FAA-approved ground course and pass the FAA written exam before entering the Part 141 flight course. As a result, many students start flight training with little or no cockpit experience, making it difficult to connect classroom theory with the practical skills needed in the air. Implementing this new standard has some positive and some negative consequences for students. Some positives include a semester before flight courses to dedicate to ground study and knowledge, and time to focus solely on ground understanding and the FAA written exam. Also, once they complete the semester focused on ground instruction, they begin their flight training and will review all required ground subject areas once more. Some negatives include a lack of hands-on experience, resulting in a disconnect between ground knowledge areas and understanding.

To bridge this gap, UVU introduced a VR-based flight simulator curriculum that aligns with requirements for private pilot training. This approach gives students early, hands-on experience in a realistic cockpit environment, giving them experience they otherwise wouldn't receive until later in their training. The idea emerged after teaching a semester of students who lacked this opportunity and noticing how much their understanding of ground knowledge suffered without prior exposure to the cockpit.

Background and Rationale

Traditional pilot training typically follows a concurrent model, where students complete ground school coursework while simultaneously gaining hands-on flight experience. UVU's

recent curriculum changes, which require students to finish the ground course before being accepted into the flight course, have highlighted a gap between ground knowledge and understanding real-world flight concepts. While this model has clear advantages, it can sometimes leave new pilots unprepared for the mental and technical demands of actual flight lessons. According to recent research, VR and AR technologies help learners better understand spatial relationships, remember maneuvers more effectively, and become comfortable with complicated technical tasks, with aviation being one notable example (Guthridge, 2022; Hight, Fussell, Kurkchubasche, & Hummell, 2022).

By introducing VR simulation earlier, even before formal flight training begins, students gain valuable hands-on experience and familiarity with cockpit procedures without being in a real airplane. By involving students in hands-on, immersive activities, this approach embodies the principles of experiential learning theory (McLeod, 2017), which identifies active participation as critical for learning and skill acquisition.

Through this program and research, UVU aims to determine whether integrating VR modules into the ground course can enhance student readiness, build confidence, and lead to better long-term outcomes in flight training.

Participants and VR Training Design

This study focused on students enrolled in Utah Valley University's Private Pilot Ground Course during the academic year. To explore the impact of VR-based training, students were divided into two groups. One group completed all seven VR simulation modules, while the other followed the traditional ground course without VR exposure. Each semester, roughly 40 students take the course, and for this study, 18 students were able to participate in the VR program. This number reflected the availability of simulators, instructors, and student schedules. Participation was voluntary and approved through UVU's internal research oversight process. Data collection includes post-course feedback emails, instructor observations, and performance outcomes measured through stage checks and exam results.

The VR program was designed in collaboration with a commercial company, using advanced flight simulation software and hardware to create a realistic cockpit experience. The curriculum includes seven modules that follow the FAA's Private Pilot Airman Certification Standards (ACS). Students practice everything from aircraft preflight and cockpit familiarization to taxiing, basic flight controls, straight-and-level flight, climbs, descents, and turns. They also complete modules on takeoffs and landings, slow flight and stalls, emergency procedures and decision-making, and traffic patterns with radio communications.

For students, the experience is immersive and hands-on. They gain the chance to familiarize themselves with cockpit procedures, practice maneuvers, and make decisions in real-time, all before ever stepping into an actual airplane. This early exposure helps bridge the gap between classroom theory and practical flight skills, giving students a stronger foundation, boosting their confidence, and preparing them for success as they move into live flight training.

Assessment Metrics and Expected Outcomes

Based on ground and simulated flight instruction provided, and the opportunity for students to apply some ground knowledge areas to flight, we expect the following outcomes for participating students.

- Improved stage check and check ride pass rates
- Better FAA written exam scores (less beginner confusion on procedures)
- Higher rate of course completion — fewer students dropping out
- Reduced cost in terms of less time spent in remedial instruction or repeating lessons
- Smoother transition to solo flight & reduced anxiety in early flight training

Student performance and engagement will be evaluated using a variety of measures. These include stage check performance during flight training, end-of-course flight evaluations, check ride pass rates, FAA written exam scores, and overall course completion and retention rates. Beyond these quantitative metrics, student testimonials and instructor feedback provide valuable insight into students' experiences, offering a more complete picture of how VR training influences learning, confidence, and preparedness for real-world flight.

Findings at UVU

Enhanced Preparedness and Confidence

Many students reported feeling significantly more confident before their first real flight lessons thanks to the VR training. One student shared:

"With or without extra credit for me, I thank you for making this program. I feel more prepared for the upcoming flight lesson next semester."
(Student Participant, Private Pilot Ground Course, Fall 2024)

Another student highlighted how the VR experience helped reduce anxiety and reinforced learning:

"I enjoyed the Sim training and felt that it helped to take concepts and put them into action. I would recommend it to everyone."

The VR modules also helped students connect classroom theory with practical flight applications. One participant explained:

"This simulator helped me a lot, especially in applying what we learn in class to this or vice versa. Sometimes it was hard to sit there for two hours with it on your head, though. Overall, I'm really glad that I did it and I feel more prepared for actual flying."

Several students even suggested that the VR component become a permanent part of the course:

"I think it should be a part of the private ground class, to help understand more about what's being taught."

These testimonials highlight how the VR program not only boosts confidence but also strengthens the connection between theoretical learning and practical skills, giving students a head start before entering the cockpit.

Skill Transfer to Real Flight Training

Students who later began actual flight training reported a clear connection between their VR experience and real cockpit proficiency. One participant explained:
"My first flight ever happened to be in a Cessna 172, where everything was familiar. I am a first-hand witness that the simulator was extremely helpful and will significantly limit the amount of actual flight time I will need to be successful in my check-ride."

Quantitative Observations

Although this research is still ongoing, early course data suggest improved student retention and higher engagement in the ground course sections that included VR simulation. Instructors noted reduced "first-flight anxiety" and faster procedural recall during students' initial flight lessons. While long-term tracking continues, these preliminary results indicate that early VR exposure can enhance both readiness and retention.

Discussion

UVU's VR program illustrates that immersive, hands-on learning can improve efficiency and reduce initial difficulties for students in aviation training (Hight, 2022; Hight, Fussell, Kurkchubasche, & Hummell, 2022). While VR does not fully mimic the real experience of flying, it provides a controlled, repeatable setting where learners can practice procedures, making it a valuable addition to conventional ground training.

According to student feedback, VR experiences boosted confidence and helped translate classroom knowledge into practical skills. This supports principles from McLeod's (2017) experiential learning theory and Mayer's (2014) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which highlights the importance of active, hands-on, and visually rich learning to enhance skill development.

Benefits to UVU and Students

For UVU, integrating VR into the Private Pilot Ground Course offers several advantages: it strengthens the university's reputation for innovation and student-centered instruction in aviation education, provides an opportunity to reduce course failures and training costs by better preparing students before they enter flight labs, and generates data-driven evidence that can guide curriculum development and attract future funding or research partnerships.

For students, the benefits are equally clear. Early VR exposure increases confidence and procedural familiarity before the first flight, improves the connection between theory and hands-on application, reduces anxiety during initial lessons, and can potentially shorten the time needed to reach proficiency. Students also experience higher engagement in the ground course and greater motivation to continue in flight training, which can translate into lower training costs and fewer course failures.

Implications for Aviation Education and National Relevance

This study contributes to the broader national conversation on integrating technology into flight education as a way to address pilot shortages and improve training efficiency. UVU's findings align with FAA-supported efforts exploring VR as a viable and effective training supplement. As aviation programs across the country face rising costs and instructor shortages, VR simulation represents a promising, evidence-backed pathway toward innovation and student success in pilot training.

Conclusion and Future Work

Incorporating virtual reality flight simulation into UVU's Private Pilot Ground Course shows strong potential to improve student preparedness, confidence, satisfaction, and success. Participant feedback suggests that VR can effectively bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world flight experiences. Early evidence indicates that VR exposure can enhance retention and readiness, ultimately supporting greater success in flight training programs.

Future research will focus on long-term outcomes, comparing check ride pass rates, flight-hour efficiency, and written exam results for VR-trained versus non-VR-trained students. Completion of this research program could establish best practices for UVU's aviation department and provide a model for aviation programs nationwide seeking to improve training efficiency and reduce student attrition through technology-enhanced learning.

Disclosure: Chat-GPT: Used to check grammar, section breaks, and flow, and was used to enhance some sentences.

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