



Of course that is not the whole (toy) story: Entrepreneurship and the cat's cradle[☆]

Chris Steyaert

*University of St Gallen, Research Institute for Organizational Psychology, Varnbühlstrasse 19,
CH-9000 St Gallen, Switzerland*

Abstract

Reading and analyzing the Toy Store story imply a critical inquiry into how the act of storytelling can be understood. The entrepreneurial story is situated within the context of the plea to downplay the focus on the individual entrepreneur. As this discussion did not share some of the critical debates on the status of the subject, a narrative study of entrepreneurship might refocus on the storytelling entrepreneur rather than on the process of storytelling. To prevent this, storytelling is conceived as an enacted performance that balances complexity and coherence and that draws upon but is not enclosed by a range of cultural and masternarratives.

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“Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will”.

“There is an order and a balance to be found in stories”.

Jeanette Winterson,
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruits

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E-mail address: chris.steyaert@unisg.ch.

1. Executive summary

Hearing or reading the Toy Store story reminds us of the many stories that today are told in classrooms or presented in the media. This has not gone unnoticed in entrepreneurship studies that turn more and more to so-called narrative approaches to research and understand entrepreneurship. Although I think narrative approaches have a large potential for entrepreneurship studies, the article focuses on a potential danger I see (and that I have experienced in the classroom myself): that is those listening to the story are more interested in the person behind the story than in the act of storytelling itself. The problem I then encounter is that the field of entrepreneurship studies has done everything to draw the attention away from the individual entrepreneur in order to make space for understanding the complexity of the entrepreneurial process but that the cultural reception of the story is not focused on the storytelling but on the entrepreneur telling the story who becomes admired and attributed with sometimes mythical capabilities. The article takes this danger as a challenge and suggests that a narrative approach can help us to return to the dismissed question of “who is the entrepreneur?” and try to give it a new problematization: the entrepreneurial subject is something that has to become explained itself and the study of storytelling and of narrative identity construction might provide many ways to do so. Rather than assuming an almighty subject behind and giving individualized agency to entrepreneurial acting, storytelling makes us understand how narrative identity construction is effected by continuously balancing complexity and coherence. For doing so, we are not totally free but we draw upon a limited number of cultural and masternarratives. The narrative study of entrepreneurship tries then to understand how in storytelling a variety of cultural and masternarratives are drawn upon, interwoven, appropriated, resisted and potentially altered. This implies that our personal narratives (such as the one of the Toy store) are far less personal and authentic as the masternarrative of possessive individualism and the cultural narrative of the entrepreneur as a “strong personality” might incline us to think so. However, performativity or this inscription of ourselves within a limited range of narratives (Brickel, 2005) does not prevent that the process of storytelling – what I call its performance – is open and indeterminate. Storytelling as a kind of “performance with performativity” is then a subtle balancing act between coherence and complexity where we stretch and play with the available strings. This is also how I suggest to read the Toy store story, namely as an ontological narrative that gives some coherence to the complexity that everyday life brings to us and that we bring to everyday life. This view on narrative I take from Jeanette Winterson’s book *Oranges are not the only Fruits*, a biographical novel that also reflects upon what storytelling is about as the biographical story unfolds. Her argument is that how much coherence we might have been able to bring to “our” story, after all it will still resemble a ball full of strings and knots. If not, our story has become history. The goal of narrative analysis in this view is then not to dissect the story but to further connect it, complexify it and play with it, and I give some illustrations of how this might be initiated. As a consequence, I suggest that a narrative study of entrepreneurship focuses on storytelling as an embodied and embedded performance where we try not only to understand the embeddedness of our stories within a range of narratives but also to follow their openness and playfulness. Storytelling is an ongoing writing of ourselves with all the incoherence and contradiction this implies and which makes that no story is ever the whole story.

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