Understanding entrepreneurial learning: a question of how?

David Rae
Nottingham Business School, The Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

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Abstract The paper aims to stimulate debate among researchers and practitioners on the use of narrative methodology as a constructive means of inquiry in developing the understanding and the practice of entrepreneurship. It argues that narrative interpretation is a valid method in researching the human learning and cultural development of entrepreneurship. Drawing on the author’s fieldwork in researching entrepreneurial learning through life stories, it demonstrates the rich insights which can be gained from discursive life story research. A conceptual model of the significant themes in entrepreneurial learning is proposed for further development and application in education and research. The paper proposes that the “living theory” of entrepreneurship is a cultural, discursive resource which may be discovered and interpreted through the narrative medium.

History is not what you thought. It is what you can remember. All other history defeats itself.

(W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman, 1066 and All That, 1930)

Introduction
How do people learn to work in entrepreneurial ways? The role of the entrepreneur is vested with great significance in economic, social and cultural development, as the rhetoric of politics, business and, increasingly, education celebrates entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. Academic research has contributed considerable extrinsic knowledge “about” entrepreneurship. But how well do we really understand the intrinsic human processes of how people develop entrepreneurial capabilities and practices? Yet this is a vital area of study which needs to take place if it is to inform public policy, education and the life choices of individuals. This paper argues for and illustrates the use of a narrative methodology which can be used to generate new understanding of how people develop entrepreneurial capability through learning. It explores the use of entrepreneurs’ life stories in understanding the discursive learning of their practice and proposes a model of entrepreneurial learning based on this initial work.

The aim of the research
This research aims to understand how people develop entrepreneurial capabilities through learning. Its concern is with the “emergent entrepreneur”

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who is discovering through the processes of entrepreneurial formation and self-discovery both “who they are” and “what they can do”. The research aim has four related questions which form the focus of the inquiry:

1. How does the sense of personal identity change as individuals enact entrepreneurial behaviours? The argument about “are they born or made?” is redundant and the focus is on the construction and enactment of entrepreneurial self-identities.

2. How do people learn to work in entrepreneurial ways: what processes and experiences are significant in their learning, and how do these relate to existing theories of learning? There are theories of cognitive and experiential learning which need to be related to the ways in which people report their learning experiences; this may enable further insights to be gained into learning theory.

3. What “living theories” of entrepreneurship can be drawn from the people’s accounts and sense-making of their experiences, and how do these correspond to the conceptual literature of entrepreneurship?

4. Is it possible to develop a useful conceptual model of entrepreneurial learning, which may inform and be used by both entrepreneurs and educators? An initial model has been developed which provides a starting point for further exploration (see Figure 1). This was based on the set of life story interviews completed in the initial stage of the research.

![Figure 1](image-url)

A conceptual model of entrepreneurial learning
Relating previous research to the case for a narrative approach
Extensive research has taken place which has aimed to define the entrepreneur, to find out what types of people become entrepreneurs, and to examine the personality and backgrounds of entrepreneurs in the quest for common characteristics and traits. The progression in academic research after Gartner (1989), who suggested that researchers should view entrepreneurship from a behavioural perspective in order to explore what entrepreneurs do to create organisations, has been to move away from studying “the entrepreneur” as an entity and towards a processual understanding of entrepreneurship. This can be summarised in the development of four major themes:

(1) **Entrepreneurial personality**: seeking to define psychological and personality traits (e.g. Chell *et al*., 1991; Brockhaus, 1982).

(2) **Entrepreneurial career development**: patterns in careers, the significance of factors such as self-efficacy (e.g. Bird, 1988; Boyd and Vozikis, 1994; Gibb Dyer, 1994).

(3) **Entrepreneurship education**: focusing on the design, process and effectiveness of education programmes, generally from an educationist perspective (e.g. Gibb, 1993; Garavan and O’Cinneide, 1994).

(4) **Cognitive approaches to entrepreneurial learning**: concentrating on the significance of expert knowledge and use of memory (e.g. Young and Sexton, 1997; Mitchell, 1997).

It is fair to say that overall an agreed conceptual framework for the study of entrepreneurial formation has yet to emerge (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), while Steyaert and Bouwen (1997) relate the fragmentation of the quest for a unifying, scientific theory of entrepreneurship and propose a narrative-based approach which acknowledges that entrepreneurship and its study are creative processes in which storytelling has a vital role. This argument builds on the challenge to logico-positivist thinking in social sciences (Gergen, 1994) and suggests that the academic discourse of formal logic based on cause-and-effect reasoning, which considers entrepreneurs and their firms as “units of analysis” available to be studied objectively as if in a laboratory, has run its course and, implicitly, alternative means of inquiry are needed if useful theories are to be created.

Entrepreneurship has been considered so far largely as an economic rather than a human and cultural behavioural concept and the traditions of positivist economic and management research have pervaded its understanding, in which disciplines of science, business, economics and, more recently, cognitive psychology have been dominant (Hill and McGowan, 1999). Overall, there has been a positivist and hypothetico-inductive approach, stemming from a natural science model in which logic and analysis are deployed in order to validate theory (Gergen, 1994). This form of research is detached, claims objectivity, and
seeks to prove its validity largely through quantitative evidence. It leads to the quest for the significance of specific entities and impersonal factors such as definitions, traits, variables, types and events (Hofer and Bygrave, 1992).

Such an approach is not implicitly “wrong”; nor, however, is it capable of generating a fuller understanding of the nature of entrepreneurship as a human, social and cultural phenomenon, which is enacted by people in a historical context (Hébert and Link, 1988). The quest for definitive “laws”, “theories” and “models” which characterises entitative thinking (Hosking and Morley, 1991), based on identifying fixed characteristics and traits, has paid little attention to exploring the human processes of how people actually learn and work in entrepreneurial ways, partly because it forces the researcher to play the role and use the language of “objective scientist” in measuring and analysing an external, factual reality.

In studying people, their learning and their work, it is not only legitimate to adopt an interpretative social science methodology, but it is essential to find ways to “get in close” and to build deep understanding by involvement (Hill and McGowan, 1999). The approach used in this research is one of social constructionism (Burr, 1995), which aims to understand entrepreneurial practices in a cultural context, through the use of language, narrative and discourse. In doing this there is a conscious move away from the entitative approach which seeks to define, measure and categorise entrepreneurial activity, and towards an interpretative approach to social enquiry which aims to generate insight and understanding and useful rather than definitive theory.

In the quest for “generalisable theory”, it is also too easy to lose the value of the specific human experience. In this way, the voice of the entrepreneur – whoever he or she may be – seems to have become disconnected from academic study through being lost in the statistical samples. The gulf between the lived reality, experience and history of entrepreneurial life and the production and application of academic theory seems wide. The history – the shared understanding of the events, the cultural significance, processes and meanings which constitute entrepreneurial life – are captured and explored very imperfectly by much research, and may even not be regarded as being valid or important at all. “Entrepreneurs” are the objects of study but the relationship seems remote and lacking in reflexivity or interaction; their “real voices” are rarely heard. As a field of study, entrepreneurship is in this way removed from the people who enact it in their daily lives in the highly uncontrolled conditions of the real world.

If we are to understand the life-worlds (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) of entrepreneurial people, we need an approach which enables exploration of the choices they make, through the accounts they give. This leads towards a discursive approach (Harré and Gillett, 1994), which regards ‘the mind” of the entrepreneurial actor as represented and enacted through their language and behaviour, discourse making “the workings of the mind available”. Discourse recognises the mind as a domain of skills and techniques which enable the individual to make meaning from their perceptions of the world; increasingly,
discourse is explored through narrative accounts (Polkinghorne, 1988). In talking, people relate their stories of what and how they learned. If we want to learn about people’s perception of their experiences, we have to listen to and make sense of their stories.

The study of narratives (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1991) has become a recognised approach in social science and has been described as the new “root metaphor” for psychology (Sarbin, 1986). But while there have been recommendations for conducting interpretative research on entrepreneurial learning (Deakins, 1996; Gibb Dyer, 1994; Reuber and Fischer, 1993; Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997), there is as yet little published research which contributes to this understanding. However, Mitchell (1997) has used oral histories as “expert scripts” to explore entrepreneurial success and failure, concluding that their use enabled the entrepreneurial process to be demystified and that “entrepreneurship is a profession susceptible to expertise”. The life story approach is a recognised research method: Atkinson (1998) observes that “a life story is first and foremost a text, to be read, understood, and interpreted on its own merit and in its own way”.

The research method
The first stage of the research was to conduct life story interviews with a group of 13 people whose careers included significant entrepreneurial attainment. This work (Rae and Carswell, 1999) identified the need to continue the research process while enabling confidence to be gained in gathering and analysing the accounts.

There is no single “method” or procedure for the analysis of speech data, but rather approaches which stem from different traditions. Content analysis simply enumerates the incidence of specific words and phrases in a text. Conversation analysis captures and dissects concrete speech acts and patterns in their context of space and time. Discourse analysis goes beyond these in recognising that we “construct” the social world through language, and that there is tremendous variety in and between accounts and the multiple interpretations which they allow. The process used was based on the guidelines and ten-stage process provided by Potter and Weatherall (1987) which, although it inevitably simplifies and over-structures, is of help to the novice in developing their own “craft skills” and finding a way through the complex field of discursive research.

In the analysis and interpretation of each account, “episodes” (Shotter, 1993) were identified around which the tellers tended to structure their stories. Through these learning episodes, tellers were often able to identify “lessons” or meanings which they had derived and which had influenced their subsequent behaviour. The chosen method of analysis was to disaggregate each transcript into a number of recognisable learning episodes and to study the description, together with its context, experiences, processes, meanings and consequent action.
This work depended entirely on the retrospective reporting of learning experiences. Given that learning is a continuing process, there is a need to follow people over a period of time rather than relying solely on retrospect. The second stage of the research, now in process, is to identify and follow a group of “emergent entrepreneurs” who are intending to create, acquire or rejuvenate a business venture over a period of 12 months or so. They are being asked to recount their life story and to revisit this in subsequent interviews. Their changing perceptions and sense of their self-identity, goals, motivations, learning experiences and “personal theories” will be tracked. Each life story will be recorded, transcribed, analysed and interpreted, the principal method being to study the episodes which are identified in the individuals’ discourse as being significant in their learning. A parallel can be drawn with the study of “emergent managers” (Watson and Harris, 1999) which explored people “becoming” managers and in the process provided significant new understandings of the role and nature of managing.

Working with life stories
During the first stage, considerable experience was gained in interpreting narrative accounts, and it became clear that, although the process is problematic, the results can be highly illuminating. Four of the issues which emerged in relation to the interpretative process are outlined below, together with the approach which the researcher used in resolving the problem.

*Can we believe the stories people tell about themselves?*
Clearly, life stories are by their nature subjective, socially constructed accounts in which the teller is both actor and narrator; they are neither totally “true” nor “untrue”, neither entirely “complete” nor “incomplete”. The same person may relate their life story and the same events to different people in quite different ways. There is no absolute “truth” but rather reality is constructed in their stories.

Exaggeration, concealment and self-justification are likely to be present to some degree in most accounts, even unintentionally: people present themselves as they wish to be perceived. Even if someone is “lying”, their “fictional story” will contain some elements of “truth” to render it credible.

A historian or advocate does not accept one testimony as “proof” but rather considers it as “evidence” which is compared with other accounts in building scenarios which make sense of a situation and recognise the differing viewpoints of the tellers; similarly, the researcher develops their understanding from multiple accounts and not just one. The chosen approach is to be non-judgemental and to interpret each account as a socially constructed text. The following example illustrates this issue:

I think it is important that you tell the story as you really felt it was. The story, as I felt it was there, was that I had done a reasonable job, but it was not good enough for them. My card was marked because of that and I had to change ship before I was pushed out. (Frank)
Here, Frank shows his awareness of the alternative ways in which his experiences could be related; for example, to conform to a social need to demonstrate success. However, he reconstructs the “truth” of the situation as he perceived it at the time, relating the meaning he derived and the action he felt socially obliged to take, and there is an underlying consistency throughout his life story which denotes it as “genuine”.

*How do we tell when people learn?*

There are different theoretical understandings of the nature of learning including cognitive (Bandura, 1986), experiential (Kolb, 1984) and implicit (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Based on Mumford (1995), the approach taken is that the result of learning is the ability to act differently, in which “knowing”, “doing” and “understanding why” are interdependent. Learning involves some form of change which causes or enables the individual to do things differently. People may “know” cognitively, but if their actions do not change they cannot be said to have “learned”. Learning involves change and difference, whether this is incremental and adaptive or discontinuous and generative, and which may be enacted in speech or body behaviour. Seen in this way, learning is a discursive, sense-making process (Weick, 1995) of constructive activity in which we create new reality, by talking and doing, as we learn. We may not be able to distinguish between the activity of learning and the activity of talking about or doing “what we have learned”; the act of learning embodies the changed behaviour and the understanding of what, how and why there is difference from a former reality.

When learning is applied to the concept of entrepreneurship, it is concerned with learning how to recognise and act on opportunities, how to organise and manage ventures, and so on. Entrepreneurial learning is taken to mean learning to work in entrepreneurial ways. But it is not only acquiring the functional “knowing”, it involves actively “doing” as well as understanding “what it is that works” and realising that one “can do it”. In entrepreneurial learning, knowing, acting and making sense are interconnected. People learn “who they can be”, construct stories of “who they want to be” and work towards enacting their storied identity. In this sense, “learning is becoming”, not only retrospective and experience-based but a future-oriented thinking process of creating a prospective reality. The following quotation from an account describes how Anna, the managing director of a firm she did not own, decided to form her own business:

I could see how much money I was making for other people who were not directly involved in the business and I thought “I am this business, this business is me”. I had no children, no family, nothing to lose. I decided then I wanted to go on my own. I knew I could, I believed in myself, I had proven to myself that I could do it. (Anna)

Anna talks in this episode about her identification with the business – “I am this business” – and her feeling of self-belief, of “knowing” she could do it. These are expressions which articulate her learning about her identity, her
business capability, and her future intention which is made possible by her learning. As she tells her story, one episode, that of being “a manager” is closed, and the next stage of the “plot”, the creation of her own venture, is opened.

Can people understand and relate their own learning processes?
There is a view that we cannot understand and give valid accounts of the ways in which we “know”, “think”, “learn”, “feel” and so on, because these “self-ascriptions” of mental processes are not based on valid criteria (Wittgenstein, 1958; Harré, 1989). Theoretically this may be so and we may indeed “tell more than we can know” (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). However, in studying people’s discourse then the “validity” or otherwise of self-ascription is of secondary importance, because people do reconstruct their thinking through their talk. In doing so they provide the researcher with insightful accounts of how they perceived and described their inner thoughts and feelings. Here is a description of decision making:

I had a legal training and the one thing that does is to give you an analytical approach to a problem, you look at both sides of it so you can argue both sides of it and that is what I do. I have an argument with myself, I sit down and talk to myself and say “those are the pluses, those are the minuses, those are the risks, those are the advantages, those are the disadvantages”. (John)

In attributing his rhetorical approach to his law degree, John shows a reflective awareness of the structure, rhetorical and dialogic form of his inner discourse and the way he had learned to make decisions. In interpreting his life story, moreover, there is again an internal consistency in the connections between thinking, arguing, deciding and acting which centre on decision making based on argument and logic, followed by impersonal ruthlessness and determined implementation, which is demonstrated in this extract:

It was looking at the issues from the purely strategic point of view, and again identify the problem, identify the solution and have the determination to ram it through against everybody, the family, shareholders, the directors didn’t want to do it. The only person who wanted to do it was me and I was right. (John)

Is the story itself or its structure and language more important as a means of understanding?
A story is much more than just a series of narrated events. There are numerous theories and perspectives which may be used to analyse the structure and language of accounts, including deconstruction (Derrida, 1978), semiotics (Potter and Weatherall, 1987), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and narrative form (Bruner, 1987). All of these can be challenging to understand and apply. Whichever theoretical stance is accepted, both “what” is narrated – the story, plot and sequence of events – and “how” it is told – the language, structures, rhetorical devices – are informative, the latter offering important clues into the ways people think about and construct their narratives, as Robert demonstrates:
I suppose an entrepreneur, rather than saying “Right, that’s where I am, that’s where I want to get to, these are all the things that are in my way”, you don’t think like that. You think “That’s where I’m going to get to”. And if somebody puts a block in the way you walk through it, you just go through it, if you can’t get through go round it but you don’t let it stop you, come what may you just sort it. It’s this breadth of thinking, it’s not saying “The conventional way is this”, let’s do it a different way, if it’s hard to do it then let’s just do it a different way, and there’s always another way, whatever it is. (Robert)

Robert describes his approach to achieving results in several interesting ways. He starts in the third person as “an entrepreneur”, shifting to the second person as “you”, while his explanation is conversational, in the form of reported speech and thought. Using the metaphor of movement, the imagery he deploys creates a rich physical, concrete description involving “walking through blocks in the way” by sheer determination. The language and linguistic devices reveal the underlying worldview of the narrator and his perception of himself as a physical, powerful actor within it.

**Findings**

It became evident in analysing the first set of narratives that there was a series of “life stages” which people went through in terms of developing their entrepreneurial careers. Five broad career stages including three stages of an entrepreneurial process emerged clearly from the stories:

2. *Early career* – first jobs, vocational or professional learning.

Subsequent to these stages, the stages of entrepreneurial careers seemed to fall into three phases of being involved with specific enterprises:

5. *Moving out and on from a venture* – selling, leaving, finding new opportunities.

These latter three stages characterised the individuals’ involvement with each business. “Engaging and entering” included such episodes as selecting, starting, acquiring or joining a business. “Growing” included taking control, committing to, driving forward and leading a business, and generally developing the ability of others within the business. “Moving out and on” was characterised by a personal or business change (or combination of the two) which led the entrepreneur to assume a reduced role and often to leave the business.

It was evident from the interviews that the act of “telling their story” enabled each person to reflect on, organise and integrate the account of their learning. The analysis of the first group of interviews identified a number of significant themes within the narrators’ discourse. These themes represent related groupings of cognitive resources in the discursive form of statements which occur in the learning episodes.
These themes are formed of participants’ talk about their:
- confidence, self-belief and self-efficacy;
- personal values and motivation to achieve;
- setting and achieving ambitious goals;
- personal theories derived from experience;
- known capabilities – existing skills and knowledge;
- relationships through which social learning occurred;
- active learning: the ability to learn through and use learning in action.

Rather than any one of these themes being of superordinate importance, it seems that it is the interaction and co-ordination between them which is especially significant in entrepreneurial learning. Through an individual process of sensemaking, people develop entrepreneurial capabilities over time by practising the cognitive resources which each of these themes expresses. The stories show coherence and movement over time towards an endpoint through the narrative medium in which these themes are evidenced repeatedly.

These themes are presented in the entrepreneurial learning model shown in Figure 1.

The following learning episode from an account illustrates the way in which the themes included in the model can be inter-related and combined in recounting a learning episode. It describes how, in the career stage of “moving out and on”, John, an experienced and successful managing director, became a non-executive director in a small company:

One of the things that I enjoy in life is developing people and developing businesses and that’s why when the family firm got to be turning over £300 million I just got bored and then I got back down to what I considered to be small businesses, where you can still relate to all the individuals in the company.

I can be very stubborn and when I became a non-executive director I identified certain areas that I wanted to be involved in where I had absolutely no experience and knowledge. I was determined to do it against all the advice and I was wrong. I got completely and utterly enthused with the concept and I didn’t use my usual analysis. I instinctively knew it was right but actually it was an absolute disaster, and I had to work jolly hard to retrieve the company and get it back on a stable basis. I believe in the long term the company will come right, but it was sheer and utter stubbornness and forgetting all the things that I have believed in. It was an arrogance that I’ve got a good track record, I know what I am doing and I’m determined that this is going to be right in an area I knew nothing about. It was a serious lesson to me, the other thing being where because one enjoys a reputation, and that reputation is important to you, you do favours for people, and help with developing small companies. (John)

This extract demonstrates the way in which the different themes are woven together in a reflective, sense-making process. John talks about his goals, of wanting to be involved in new areas of business in smaller companies. He attributes this partly to boredom – the need for new outlets for active learning – and partly to his liking for the social learning process of helping people find ways to run their business better. He is frank about his self-belief – “I know
what I am doing”, and in the long term he believes he will be successful despite
the mistakes he made. Retrospectively, he realises that he failed to apply the
personal theory of analysis and decision making on which he had previously
relied. He also realises that moving into areas outside his known capabilities
has meant risking complete failure. His frustration in failing to use his previous
learning – “sheer and utter stubbornness and forgetting all the things that I
have believed in” – is clear through his self-critical talk. The only way he sees
to succeed is to be completely determined, and to decide and learn quickly what
needs to be done.

*The development of personal theory*

As discussed earlier in this paper, the entrepreneurial learning model is being
developed and refined through further, longitudinal research. It is seen as a
way of understanding and reflecting entrepreneurial learning from narrative.
One of the most important insights gained in its development was the base of
“personal theory” which was elicited in the narratives. Personal theory, which
is analogous to the notion of “practical theory” (Shotter, 1993) in providing
analytical thinking tools, can be described as the individual “knowing what
works” for them in interpreting, deciding and acting in situations. Individual
personal theories express, often in crisp, memorable and metaphor-rich
phrases, the principles and models people use. Here is an example:

I got into thinking at a young age that if you give a good service and deliver a good product
then that’s how you get rewarded. So, my philosophy in business is if you can give to enough
people then you receive. (Frank)

Frank’s “philosophy” or personal theory of “if you can give to enough people
then you receive” was learned from his experience at a young age – charging
his sisters for cleaning their shoes, having two paper rounds – and then from
“giving back” into the community when he was running a business. This
apparently simple theory is a significant, recurring theme in his life story. It
seems that personal theory is a discursive resource through which the
reasoning and decision-making processes of people working entrepreneurially
can be interpreted. Personal theory does not “arise” but is learned from a range
of sources, especially experience and social learning. Although it is the product
of an individual sense-making process, the similarities and relationships
between the personal theories of different people can also be revealing. Here are
examples of entrepreneurs’ statements about achievement:

I really believe you can do anything if you believe in yourself.

You can get anywhere that you believe you can, they say that and I reckon it’s true.

I know I can do anything I want to do even now.

It is the determination to say, “That’s where I’m going to get to and I will get there”.

All of these statements arose unprompted by the researcher within the
narratives. The similarity of the espoused beliefs and theories, even the words
used, is interesting. At one level, they might be taken to indicate that this
language of self-belief and goal orientation is an unremarkable characteristic of the way enterprising people think and talk. But is there something else going on? The words used by one – “they say that and I reckon its true” – suggest it may be “received wisdom”, a pervasive belief which he has heard, thought about and accepted as valid. There are other patterns and similarities which emerge as the discourse used by these entrepreneurs is studied; for example, in relation to relationships with people and attitudes towards risk.

If the linguistic concepts of personal theories provide the “thinking tools” for entrepreneurs, then when these theories are expressed socially through narratives, they may form an entrepreneurial discourse of meanings and phrases which communicates ideas and theories of entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour. In this way, the personal theories of individuals contribute to a wider and pervasive discursive framing (Watson and Harris, 1999) of the “living theory”, shared meanings and cultural resources of entrepreneurship. Concepts only exist in our thinking when we have the vocabulary to describe them. It seems likely that the social process of “learning the language” of entrepreneurial discourse may itself be significant in the cultural formation and development of entrepreneurial capability and identity, and an important aspect for further research in this study.

Conclusions
There are two conclusions which may be drawn from this research so far, one relating to the conceptual model and the other to the narrative method. The conceptual model of entrepreneurial learning is gained from the interpretation of a small number of in-depth interviews and none of the themes which emerge in it is in itself new; they can be traced in theoretical literature. What is new is that the narrative accounts make very clear both the significance of these themes and notably their “connectedness” in the learning process. That is quite different from asserting, as much research has done, that specific variables or factors such as self-efficacy are especially significant, to the exclusion of others. The importance is that, in their accounts, people use similar themes and linguistic concepts to talk about their learning.

The model itself is being used by people in the process of entrepreneurial emergence to make sense of their learning (Rae, 1999). It is subject to a pragmatic test in that, if people find it useful and applicable to their learning, then it has validity. The early results are encouraging and suggest that there is value in people using it as a starting point in creating an individual learning map which they can use in making sense of their own ideas and experiences.

The notion of entrepreneurial discourse which frames the “living theory” of entrepreneurship is one of a number of findings from the initial stage of the research which, together with the conceptual model, may be significant. These will be reviewed during the second stage of research which will allow the validity of these notions to be tested over a period of time.

Turning to the narrative method in researching entrepreneurial learning, it can be concluded that it has both advantages and disadvantages. The richness
and authenticity it affords in accessing directly the “real, lived experience” of entrepreneurs by getting in close is powerful. As a concurrent or retrospective process, it also has applications linked to researching business growth, organisational change, strategy formation and problem solving. It is a reflexive process in which the researcher not merely is an observer but can be an active participant. It can be used as a creative, theory-building process.

But for each of these benefits, there are drawbacks. It is a small-scale and time-intensive approach. Finding, selecting and building trust with enterprising people who will agree to tell their story can be a slow process in which the individual and their story need to be treated sensitively. The choice of interpretative method is difficult, as they originate from different intellectual traditions and require the intensive acquisition and practice of craft skill to apply. Theorising from field research is possible, but it is hard to validate the theories for any more general applicability. There may also be a danger of focusing on the entrepreneur as prime actor to the exclusion of others, such as employees, advisers, investors and partners, whose roles and stories may also be significant. And the researcher’s own role requires careful management, being both involved and a participant in the interpersonal construction of narratives, yet detached in needing to analyse them as evidence.

However, despite these reservations, narrative-based research has the potential to generate new insights into entrepreneurship, and to benefit entrepreneurs themselves and those who educate, support or work with them. Moreover, this form of research offers a means of closing the gap between the experience and sense-making of entrepreneurs, and researchers who aim to understand and discover what is going on. People who work entrepreneurially learn through stories and the living theories implicit within them, since they form an available means of creating and sharing understanding which is immediately recognised. The reality and folklore of entrepreneurship is enacted through narrative, and researchers can contribute by ensuring that these cultural artefacts are recorded and captured as a means of learning about the practice and living theory of the domain. The result may even be to create a shared history which has meaning for both communities and brings them together. Henry Ford may, or may not, have said that “history is bunk”; but we all remember that he said it.

References


