



Why are entrepreneurs telling the story about their start-up more powerful compared to a professor providing a framework, offering lectures etc., professor William B. Gartner wonders.

Illustration: Pernille Brun Andersen

The entrepreneur as storyteller

William B. Gartner – Bill Gartner – is a professor of Entrepreneurship and the Art of Innovation in the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School, where he is investigating the role of storytelling in entrepreneurship education. He believes that the stories entrepreneurs tell students in class about their start-ups are very valuable; entrepreneurial storytelling creates identification and is an important medium for learning about entrepreneurship.

By Irene Houstrup

▲ **INTERVIEW** Puzzled by why students would say they learn more from entrepreneurs telling their story in class than from traditional lectures, world-leading scholar in entrepreneurship Professor Bill Gartner embarked on a long investigation to find out why storytelling is so important in entrepreneurship education.

Since 2013, Bill Gartner has been a professor of Entrepreneurship and the Art of Innovation in the Department of Management,

Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School, CBS. His current scholarship at CBS focuses on entrepreneurial behaviour and the rhetoric of entrepreneurial practice. His work in this field supports research on the development of narrative theories and practices to enhance entrepreneurship pedagogy and training.

The “paradox” of entrepreneurial storytelling

Bill Gartner first identified the entrepreneurial narrative, or storytelling, “paradox” when he began working with entrepreneurship, but he struggled with it for many years:

‘If I would ask any of my students about what they learn the most from in the classes I teach, they would say: “Entrepreneurs talking in class about what they do.” I wondered what it was about entrepreneurs telling the story about their start-up, compared to me as a professor providing a framework, offering lectures, books, articles etc. – why are stories more powerful?’

He realized that people’s stories are an important medium of learning for human beings – we think and act through stories.

'It's one thing for me to talk to students about how a person can become successful, but it's much more valuable to see the person who actually started a business. The personal stories show that entrepreneurship is possible. When an entrepreneur shares a story, a student is more likely to say "if she or he can do it, so can I";' he says and adds that this identification is a key to understanding why storytelling is so important in learning about entrepreneurship.

He believes that stories provide details of how entrepreneurs find opportunities, solve start-up problems and overcome the many obstacles that are faced in developing a business:

'A very complicated set of tasks can be described through a story,' he says.

Linguistic innovators

'Business schools tend to talk in a "rational" way about why entrepreneurs make decisions, yet in their stories entrepreneurs talk about how issues in their entire lives come into play when they become entrepreneurs. So, entrepreneurs don't talk about finding opportunities, they talk about living their lives, and how entrepreneurial activities are a part of that,' he says.

Bill Gartner is interested in entrepreneurs as "linguistic innovators". He believes they manufacture their own language in order to convey their vision:

'I believe that what entrepreneurs say, and how they say it, matters. For example, entrepreneurs don't talk the way academics talk about the entrepreneurial process – academics talk about ideas like opportunities; entrepreneurs simply mention the idea. And they don't talk about failure in the way that academics talk about failure. When situations don't meet expectations they might talk about that being a learning experience or the chance to fail fast to move to another opportunity or change in new ways,' he explains.

Analyzing the stories of 300 entrepreneurs

According to Bill Gartner, students and faculty need to be better listeners and better readers of what entrepreneurs actually say.

'It's hard to analyze what entrepreneurs say about what they do. It's hard to pay attention to pick up knowledge of what behaviours are undertaken, how entrepreneurs make decisions, and how they deal with problems. So, getting students to have better "tools and skills" at analyzing stories is really important, and academia plays an important role here,' he says and adds:

'The academic language legitimizes the discourse that entrepreneurs have about how the process works. So I think the phenomenology is important, but entrepreneurs themselves are really the key. As a scholar, I want to legitimize their knowledge and ways of thinking about how entrepreneurship works and discover more of how that happens. And my empirical research does that too.'

Bill Gartner is currently analyzing videos of 300 entrepreneurs' stories at Stanford University and is working to establish a theoretical core based on entrepreneurs' real-life experiences. He has

recently published a paper on how entrepreneurs talk about failure on the basis of some of these stories.

Open-access publication on entrepreneurial storytelling

One of the other ways Bill Gartner is working with entrepreneurial storytelling is by publishing and editing a series of open-access publications under the name Entrepreneurial Narrative Theory Ethnomethodology and Reflexivity – ENTER. Each publication focuses on a specific entrepreneurial narrative, which is illustrated by different scholars from different angles. The first issue, which focused on the Californian company The Republic of Tea, was published in 2010 and is widely used for teaching in universities.

Storytelling across universities

Bill Gartner wants to encourage cooperation among scholars within the field of entrepreneurship, both internally at CBS and across universities. He is very interested in the kinds of stories that scholars tell about how change and innovation work in their own situations.

'Some institutions have this kind of entrepreneurial storytelling, others don't. If we want more entrepreneurship across universities, we have to tell more stories about how it works. And we have to get scientists, who are legitimate storytellers to other scientists, to tell their stories about how that process works. To me, it's not about changing the institutional aspects – rules and regulations – it's changing the stories we tell about who we are. There are always ways to get around the rules and regulations. We just need to know that it's possible. To me, that's the power of storytelling: It's a huge mechanism for transferring information, knowledge and skill sets that you can't do any other way,' he says.

CBS, Bill Gartner believes, has a unique foundation in humanities and business, and he intends to try to instil the humanistic approaches – and not least entrepreneurial storytelling – in entrepreneurship at CBS.

Because, as he emphasizes:

'Entrepreneurship begins with realizing that what can be imagined is often possible.'

ENTER

Entrepreneurial Narrative Theory Ethnomethodology and Reflexivity (ENTER) is a research journal published at Clemson University Digital Press, Clemson University, South Carolina, USA. enter research- and education magazine is a separate, CBS-based, Entrepreneurship Platform publication with ambitions to disseminate information about entrepreneurship research and education.

Read more about the Entrepreneurial Narrative Theory Ethnomethodology and Reflexivity:

www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/pubs/enter

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CBS ENTREPRENEURSHIP PLATFORM

Copenhagen Business School (CBS) established the Entrepreneurship Platform in spring 2013. The platform integrates and coordinates entrepreneurship research, education and outreach activities at CBS and is a single point of entry for entrepreneurship at the Copenhagen Business School.

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