

Introduction to Special Issue on the Rhetoric of Entrepreneurship

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Abstract:

Introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* on the rhetoric of entrepreneurship. The author introduces basic definitions and concepts from the field of entrepreneurship, then identifies three issues linking rhetoric to entrepreneurship: rhetoric and identity; rhetoric, culture, and community; and rhetoric and persuasion.

Keywords: rhetoric; entrepreneurship; professional communication



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Introduction to the *JBTC* Special Issue on the Rhetoric of Entrepreneurship: Theories, Methodologies, and Practices

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Suppose a software developer named Ada has an idea for a truly revolutionary app. This innovation could change the world! But many such innovations *could*; few actually *do*. And as Ada begins to think through how to get this innovative app to the people who might use it, she realizes that innovation was perhaps the easiest part. Now comes the hard part: Ada must persuade others to see the potentials in the app that she sees. And that means being willing to change or iterate the innovation, because there is no transportation without transformation (Akrich et al. 2002a, b; cf. Rogers 2003). She must get people to invest in her idea, to provide support ranging from hard cash to word-of-mouth. She must persuade others to quit their jobs and work for her for the promise of potential future gains. She must figure out how the innovation will actually make money, and from whom, and how to get the innovation in front of them so they can start to believe in it too.

And in the process, Ada must persuade herself to become something different and perhaps alien: an entrepreneur.

What is entrepreneurship, and why should we study it?

Entrepreneurship—roughly, the process of discovering and conceptualizing problems, then solving those problems with innovative solutions—has gotten considerable attention lately in a variety of contexts. Certainly it has been a continuing focus for firms and corporations, leading to new models such as open innovation and open source partnerships as well as rethought opportunities such as intrapreneurship. But entrepreneurship has also been applied in other private and public contexts. For instance, some successful entrepreneurs have encouraged students to skip college and build companies instead. On the other hand, educators have been developing new tools (e.g., Michigan State’s Eli Review), pursuing technology commercialization, and exploring new models for helping students to learn (e.g., MOOCs). Meanwhile, long-term changes in information technologies and the economy are pushing more and more people into the entrepreneurship path—sometimes reluctantly—while some legislative reforms (such as the Affordable Care Act) are making it easier for new entrepreneurs to tread that path. And in the social sector, nonprofits are exploring entrepreneurial models to engage donors and solve social problems in new ways (Neff & Moss 2011), while companies and not-for-profits are exploring social entrepreneurship models that provide sustainable social change (Steyaert & Hjorth 2006).

In each of these contexts, entrepreneurship involves identifying new opportunities, then building an organization to take advantage of them. This work is sustained rhetorically in a number of ways for entrepreneurs such as Ada.

First, Ada must take on the identity of an entrepreneur: she must begin thinking of herself as an entrepreneur. Peter Drucker once said, “the entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity” (1993, p.28). Entrepreneurs discover and conceptualize problems, then look for opportunities to solve those problems with innovative solutions— solutions that could involve new combinations of products, services, processes, or principles (Schumpeter 1934). Such innovations can

range from household gadgets to industrial processes to social services to viral phone apps . Above all, entrepreneurs take on risks in hopes of rewards (Knight 2012)—risks that most people are unwilling to take. Ada must decide whether she is willing to take on this identity and all it entails.

Second, Ada must sustain her entrepreneurial work through communities and cultures to which she has access. Externally, these could include Ada’s family and friends, specific cultural or ethnic groups with which she is affiliated, and entrepreneur associations to which she belongs (such as mentor groups, accelerators, incubators, or coworking spaces). Internally, these might include the organization that forms around the entrepreneurial opportunity, such as the company that will produce and market her new app. Ada has to reach out to her communities, but she also has to *build* a community.

Third, Ada must persuade stakeholders: investors, distributors, partners, and even potential employees. In business, that activity often involves researching potential markets, developing a business model, articulating a value proposition, assembling an appropriate team, and putting together a marketing plan and business plan. Ada must therefore learn a variety of genres, figure out how to make them persuasive to different potential stakeholders, and approach stakeholders often.

To be successful in achieving her vision, Ada must develop, extend, and hone complex arguments to interest her support community, her stakeholders, and herself in the vision—and to adapt that vision to the needs of the stakeholders. From developing an idea to researching the market, from sketching out the business model to describing the value proposition, from gathering customer feedback to pitching a product, she must perform many small arguments that form a larger coherent argument.

As the above suggests, entrepreneurship is often focused on developing business opportunities. But entrepreneurship can also take other forms. For instance, organizations sometimes engage in *social entrepreneurship*, which involves finding new models for sustaining themselves and engaging diversified

funding streams while embarking on social change. Public universities often *commercialize technologies* that they have developed. *Open innovation* involves developing new entrepreneurial opportunities by creating partnerships between existing organizations and unaffiliated crowds. *Open source projects* arguably involve entrepreneurship, although the opportunities being exploited do not translate directly to profits. Finally, *intrapreneurship* involves taking risks and innovating within a larger organization.

In all of its forms, entrepreneurship involves rhetoric. This aspect has been explored in the entrepreneurship literature, but lightly and often not by name.

Rhetoric and entrepreneurship: Outside the rhetoric literature

Outside of rhetoric and professional communication, much work has examined issues related to rhetoric, although not often under that explicit heading. Below, I review three specific issues: Rhetoric and identity; rhetoric, culture, and community; and rhetoric and persuasion.

Rhetoric and identity

I said above that Ada must take on the identity of an entrepreneur. But constructing an entrepreneurial identity can be difficult for two reasons.

First, entrepreneurs like Ada fail—often. (After all, entrepreneurs take on higher levels of risk than others as a matter of course.) Because that is true, entrepreneurs must make sense of business failure when it happens. For instance, Singh et al. (2015) investigated failure stories of 12 entrepreneurs and found that “stigmatization ultimately triggers epiphanies or deep personal insights which transform entrepreneurs’ view of failure from a very negative to a positive life experience” (p.150). Byrne and Shepherd (2013) examined eight entrepreneurial failure narratives and found that entrepreneurs’ “negative and positive emotions act in concert to facilitate sensemaking—high negative emotions motivate, and high positive emotions inform, sensemaking efforts” (p.377), which not only allowed the entrepreneurs to make sense

of the immediate failure but also to make better sense of future opportunities. But when entrepreneurial institutions fail, those narratives may become more complicated. Zilber (2007) reported that after the dot-com crash of 2000, he collected narratives about the industry-wide failure from participants in a high-tech conference in Israel. Although these participants constructed “a shared story of the crisis that reflected and further strengthened the established institutional order,” they also told “a counter-story of indictment, blaming other groups for the crisis and calling for changes in the institutional order” (p.1035). Failure hurts, and entrepreneurs must learn how to understand that failure as part of their success narrative if they hope to endure enough of it to succeed. That is, they must construct an *entrepreneurial identity* that allows them to recover from the failures associated with this high-risk activity.

This brings us to the second point. This entrepreneurial identity is not constructed in isolation. To take on this identity, entrepreneurs often seek out mentoring within a community of practice. This mentoring helps them to construct their own identity, but it also serves as a source of social capital, allowing them to be “admitted into a hallowed community of entrepreneurs who recognise and acknowledge each other for their risk taking, nous, wits, achievements and bruises” (Rigg & O’Dwyer 2012, p.324). That is, identity work allows entrepreneurs to create homophilous (“birds-of-a-feather”) ties. Forming this “set of dyadic ties” allows entrepreneurs to “access the resources and knowledge needed to create and sustain a venture” (Phillips et al. 2013, p.134). The narrative identity work also extends across organizations such as a firm and its customers and suppliers: Downing (2005), for instance, draws on Giddings and Goffman to propose a framework “for capturing *the collective positioning of identities and actions that establish ontology and precede collective learning or inertia*” (p.198, his emphasis).

Rhetoric, culture, and community

As the above suggests, entrepreneurs like Ada do not make it on their own: They are supported by many others, including mentors and homophilous ties (as we’ve seen), but also families, ethnic networks, and the broader communities and cultures in which these entrepreneurs operate.

The support of *families* is most visible in family-owned businesses. For instance, in their study of German wineries, Jaskiewicz et al. (2015) note that family firms are typically less entrepreneurial after the founder departs, but there are exceptions due to “*entrepreneurial legacy*, which we define as the family’s rhetorical reconstruction of past entrepreneurial achievements or resilience” (p.29). These exceptions engaged in “three strategic activities—i.e., strategic education, entrepreneurial bridging, and strategic succession—that nurture transgenerational entrepreneurship” (p.31). Similarly, in her study of 38 family-owned firms in northern Italy’s silk industry, Yanagisako (2002) examines individuals’ and families’ decisions about entrepreneurship. Family oral histories and founder stories play a prominent part in these family-owned businesses, but the author also traces how capital, labor, and technical knowledge flow through networks of consanguinity and marriage (p.116).

Ethnic groups have also played a part in sustaining entrepreneurship, especially ethnic groups that constitute a minority in the space in which the entrepreneur operates. For instance, Iyer & Shapiro (1999) interview 17 entrepreneurs from ethnic minorities. Those interviewees report that they tend not to seek help from public or private institutions, instead using “surrogate modes of venture capital generation” (p.97) such as informal credit networks. Menzies et al. (2000) found that such ethnic networks tended to use ethnic social capital extensively. Specifically, according to their literature review, ethnic entrepreneurs tend to use co-ethnic employees, markets, suppliers, and sources of finance. However, other ethnic-minority entrepreneurs may not have access to such networks. For instance, Min (1990) interviewed 557 Korean immigrants in the Los Angeles area, discovering that they depend on white suppliers (and face some discrimination by those suppliers); simultaneously, these entrepreneurs’ businesses are sometimes avoided by customers belonging to other ethnic minorities.

Broader communities and cultures also interact with entrepreneurs on several different levels. For instance, in their study of the king crab industry, Alvarez et al. (2015) trace how one entrepreneur

“create[d] new industry standards and government regulations in order to support the for-profit king crab opportunity” (p.96). In a perhaps more benevolent example, McKeever et al. (2014) examine how entrepreneurs in two “depleted” North Irish communities identified with, and engaged with, those communities in order to help and rebuild them. This theme of becoming also anchors Bjerregaard and Jonasson’s (2014) study of a South Korean credit card company in the aftermath of the 1997 crisis, a crisis that induced contradictions between Korean and US “logics.”

Rhetoric and persuasion

Finally, entrepreneurs like Ada must persuade others—lots of others. The entrepreneurship literature has a surprising number of articles that apply the tools of rhetoric to understand persuasion and legitimacy. But these articles often use *rhetoric* in a much more restricted sense than our field does.

In one influential article in management studies, “Organizations as rhetoric,” Alvesson (1993) argues that “a crucial dimension of a knowledge-intensive organization concerns the struggle with ... ambiguity, which leads to efforts to refine various rhetorical strategies” (p.997). Elsewhere, the author argues that due to this ambiguity, “the demands on the agents involved in terms of providing convincing accounts of what they do, and what sort of people they are, become central. This means that rhetorical skills and rhetorical acts become highly significant for the constitution of the company, its workers, activities and external relations” (2001, p.871) Thus,

Rhetoric, then, is not just external to the core of knowledge-intensive [work], but is in a way its core. Rhetoric does not simply mean persuasive talk being in some kind of opposition to ‘reality’ or ‘truth’, but refers to elements of argument and persuasion which may, or may not, be backed up by ‘facts’. ... Organizations and jobs that score high on ambiguity – such as the ones we are addressing here – cannot be managed without skills in, and attention to, rhetoric. (p.871, his emphasis)

Alvesson cites no rhetoric scholars in either article. However, in its broad outlines, his description does seem to accord to what we in the field mean by rhetoric. Others, particularly in economics, similarly describe rhetoric in broad terms. For instance, Klamer (2011) draws on his frequent collaborator Dierdre McCloskey's work to argue that cultural entrepreneurs develop their own characters through narrative, while Cosgel (1996) draws on Klamer and McCloskey's earlier work—as well as that of literary theorist Northrop Frye—to examine entrepreneurs' use of metaphors and stories: “Choices of metaphors and stories matter. Adopting a rhetorical approach and using the tools of literary theory, I have shown the ways choices of metaphors and stories matter for the role of the entrepreneur in economics” (p.72).

In the study of entrepreneurship specifically, Green & Li use Alvesson's 1993 article as their point of departure. Green & Li (2011) characterize rhetoric in terms of classical rhetoric (Aristotle, Cicero) and new rhetoric (Burke; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca). Their gloss revolves around agency: “Classical rhetoric focuses on *how we use words*,” while “New rhetoric focuses more on *how words use us*” (p.1671). Drawing on Burke, they combine the two in order to better understand institutional logics. This work also builds on Green's earlier (2004) work using rhetorical theory to reconceptualize the diffusion of managerial practices. These articles present rhetoric in a relatively expansive way, although they tend to focus on words and sequence.

However, much work in entrepreneurship takes rhetoric to be much narrower.

For instance, in a series of influential articles, Suddaby and colleagues relegate rhetoric to *microlevel discourse*. Suddaby & Viale (2011) argue, “Discourse operates at a macro-social level and, while it reflects extant power positions within society, discourse is not particularly associated with the agency or intentionality of individual actors,” while “Rhetoric, by contrast, operates at much *lower levels of analysis*, such as the organizational field, and is much more intentional or agentic” (p.434, my emphasis). Suddaby & Greenwood (2005) liken rhetorical analysis to discourse analysis: “Rhetorical analysis shares

[discourse analysis'] interest in the role of language in structuring social action but is distinguished by a very specific focus on suasion and influence. In this context, rhetoric forms a sub-set of discourse analysis" that is focused on "explicitly political or interest-laden discourse" (pp.39-40). In this context, Suddaby, Foster, & Trank (2010) explore "rhetorical history" as a story that management tells in a firm, one that involves deliberate, "manipulated" (p.157) remembering and forgetting in organizational memory.

Similarly, Ruebottom (2013) identifies rhetoric with "microstructures" of language such as "vocabulary sets and rhetorical devices," which "are building blocks of rhetorical strategy" (p.101). Van Werven et al. (2015) locate "the power of arguments" in a typology that "provides a base for future research on the micro-discursive processes through which entrepreneurs claim, and in turn achieve, legitimate distinctiveness for their ventures" (p.616).

Such characterizations of rhetoric are far narrower than those we use in the rhetoric and professional communication literature—and, I think, far less productive for understanding the rhetorical work of entrepreneurs such as Ada.

Rhetoric and entrepreneurship: Inside the rhetoric literature

Turning to the literature of rhetoric and professional communication, we can see the same themes being explored. The sources in this body of literature provide us with a better idea of how rhetoric illuminates the journey that Ada and other entrepreneurs take. Within the rhetoric and professional communication literature, scholars have applied a more expansive understanding of rhetoric—but they have also spent much less time on the topic of entrepreneurship. This gap has begun to be filled—see the recent special issue of *IEEE Transactions in Professional Communication* (Spinuzzi 2016)—but much more needs to be done.

Rhetoric and identity

Professional communication scholars have explored how entrepreneurs such as Ada form their entrepreneurial identity.

For instance, scholars have studied entrepreneurs who work within the field of professional communication. One frequently cited article is Spartz & Weber (2015), who surveyed surveyed 101 entrepreneurs in Wisconsin and North Alabama about the writing they did as entrepreneurs as well as their attitudes and audiences. Another article with a similar set of participants is Lauren & Pigg (2016), who gathered entrepreneurs' employment narratives to understand how these entrepreneurs networked to build their reputations.

Sean Williams has also examined the entrepreneurial identity, concluding that “entrepreneurs must learn the roles they need to play” (2010, p.15). In a later article, Williams and his colleagues (2016) collect narratives from individual entrepreneurs in the United States, Spain, and China, using these narratives to examine how entrepreneurs navigate culturally situated tensions by telling stories.

In their case study, Lucas et al. (2016) concluded that these student entrepreneurs and their audiences frequently disagreed about whether the students showed passion. Since passion turns out to be an important criterion for investors, entrepreneurs must be able to demonstrate, not just feel, passion about their work; it must be a key part of their identity.

Rhetoric, culture, and community

Other professional communication scholars have investigated entrepreneurship in terms of culture and community.

Perhaps the most well-known study along these lines is Doheny-Farina's (1986, 1992) eight-month ethnography studying writing at a software startup. In that study, Doheny-Farina concluded that writing and the company's organizational structure reciprocally influenced each other. O'Connor (2002) similarly spent 10 months in her own ethnography of a high-tech startup; she argued that this company was founded and governed through six basic narrative types (founding, visionary, marketing, strategy, historical, and conventional) in three main categories (personal, generic, and situational).

More recently, Fraiberg (2013) conducted a case study of an Israeli start-up company. That case study linked "local multilingual and multimodal literacy practices to wider institutional, cultural, and global contexts" (p.10). Along similar lines, in a series of case studies, Spinuzzi (2015) examined how entrepreneurs in nonemployer firms linked themselves to other firms through shared workspaces and subcontracting.

Most recently, Van Hout and Van Praet (2016) present a teaching case in which students experience how non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs use English in their public displays (such as billboards, shop windows, and posters). Using Linguistic Landscaping, Van Hout and Van Praet report that students became sensitized to linguistic innovations and ethnocultural stereotyping.

Rhetoric and persuasion

The persuasive aspects of entrepreneurship provide perhaps the most obvious link to rhetoric.

Not surprisingly, much of the entrepreneurship work in rhetoric and professional communication centers on the most nakedly persuasive genre: the pitch. Galbraith et al. (2014), for instance, examine how pitch form, passion, and preparedness impact grant funding; they concluded that when decisionmakers rated these persuasive elements highly, they also tended to rate other non-communication factors more highly: as technology merit, management ability, and commercial potential. Spinuzzi and colleagues (Jakobs et

al. 2015; London et al. 2015; Spinuzzi et al. 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Spinuzzi, Jakobs, & Pogue 2016) examined pitch development in studies of an entrepreneurship training program, specifically how entrepreneurs revised (or failed to revise) their pitches based on written and oral feedback. More recently, Belinsky and Gogan (2016) describe a yearlong autoethnography on pitching. They apply a frame analysis to illuminate how pitchers acquire and apply frames for pitches.

Crowdfunding is a variation of pitching, but with more distributed investors who invest much smaller amounts. In Vealey and Gerding's recent teaching case (2016), they explore how to incorporate crowdfunding into the professional communication classroom while emphasizing its social, civic, and ethical dimensions.

Persuasion, however, happens within entrepreneurial teams as well as when those teams pitch to external stakeholders. For instance, heuristics such as the Business Model Canvas (BMC; see Blank & Dorf 2012; Osterwalder & Pigneur 2010) help entrepreneurs to think through their choices and persuade their teams about the efficacy of those choices. In a case study, Hixson and Parette (2014) examine how student teams used the BMC to mediate their work and learning.

So we in rhetoric and professional communication have begun to contribute to an understanding of how entrepreneurs such as Ada work. But much more remains to be done. This special issue is another step in that direction.

What this special issue will cover

The three articles of this special issue should build the theoretical and methodological foundation for better understanding the rhetoric of entrepreneurship.

In terms of *identity*, Steven Fraiberg continues his previous (2013) work in “Startup Nation: Studying Transnational Entrepreneurial Practices in Israel’s Startup Ecosystem.” Returning to the Israeli startup ecosystem, Fraiberg applies the construct of mobility systems to understand how entrepreneurs in Israel’s extraordinary startup community weave themselves into dense transnational networks. The construction of entrepreneurial identity turns out to be vital in this account. By examining how “actors, texts, objects, policies, cultural practices, narratives, and institutions” interacted to construct these networks, Fraiberg concludes that studies of such innovation systems must “account for these densely intertwined streams of chained activity,” streams that are “dynamic, changing, and densely knotted with other such systems in and across near and distant spaces.”

In terms of *community*, Natasha N. Jones gathers and analyzes the narratives of successful black entrepreneurs. In “Rhetorical Narratives of Black Entrepreneurs: Origin Stories, Economic Empowerment, and Sustainability,” she explores how “black business owners rhetorically position themselves for success, sustainability, and empowerment” by “harness[ing] rhetorical agency in ways that engage with sociocultural and political challenges to work within and resist dominant ideologies.” Drawing on narrative inquiry, Jones identifies narratives of economic, community, legacy, and social justice that these rhetors used as they effected social change through their work.

Finally, in terms of *persuasion*, Jeffrey M. Gerding and Kyle P. Vealey rhetorically analyze a case of crowdfunding in “When is a Solution Not a Solution?: Engaging Civic Crowdfunding and Social Entrepreneurship to Solve Wicked Problems.” This case examines +Pool, “a civic entrepreneurial venture involving the collaboration of architects, designers, engineers, artists, and researchers” that approaches the pollution of New York City’s East River as a wicked problem. “[T]he developers of +POOL undoubtedly face a deeply rhetorical dilemma: how do you persuade or motivate people to be financially and socially invested in a problem that, by definition, cannot be solved?” Through a detailed rhetorical analysis, Gerding and Vealey analyze “how civic entrepreneurs work rhetorically to grapple with and

solve wicked problems” through *hybrid solutions* that “reflect the complexity, fluidity, and wickedness of the problems they hope to solve.”

These three articles provide sophisticated, rhetorically based views of how entrepreneurs use rhetoric in their emergent, risky, dynamic work. As our notional Ada begins her startup, it’s my hope that these articles can give us a sophisticated understanding of the rhetorical work that underpins her success: how she takes on the entrepreneurial identity, how she draws on a community of supporters to succeed, and how she persuades (and is persuaded by) others.

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