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Alice's Wonderment in Tourism Land

Two Tales of Innovation

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Published in:
Euro-TEFI 2017 Building our stories

2017

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Prologue

I beg your indulgence to tell an unconventional tale – a tale about tales or more accurately, a tale of tales retold. Names have been changed to protect the innocent; all else is as real as subjective human existence permits. So it is neither a story of fact nor fiction but a construction (Pernecky, 2012), as "even the simplest narratives are" (de Montoya, 2004, p. 77).

The protagonist is an inquisitive researcher named Alice. The moniker is a nod to the heroine of the 1865 fantasy novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* written by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll (Carroll, 1866). *That* Alice falls down a rabbit hole into a strange world inhabited by odd anthropomorphic creatures, whereupon she undertakes a fantastic sense-making journey. As a prime example of the literary nonsense genre (Lecercle, 2012), it aptly resembles the work of social science wherein researchers explore peculiar social worlds and strive to make sense of it all.

This Alice falls into the strange world of tourism; whereupon she meets rather odd creatures – tourism entrepreneurs that have managed rare feats of innovation. Each tells her a fantastic tale. However, "tales have to tell themselves" (Smith & Anderson, 2004, p. 142); so rather than revealing the end at the start, it behoves me to ask that you take the roundabout path by joining Alice in her journey.

A Beginning

One day Alice developed an interest in tourism innovation. It all started when she noticed that innovation had become topical. Billed as "the lifeblood of most successful modern businesses" (Tourism Victoria, 2014b) and "the only way to stay in business" (TTNQ, 2015), innovation was the new 'Holy Grail'. News stories (Sherry, 2015), industry conferences (TTNQ, 2015), awards (QTIC, 2014, 2015; UNWTO, 2015), government websites (Tourism Victoria, 2014a, 2014b) and policy (e.g. OECD, 2006; OECD, 2010; RET, 2009a, 2009b) extolled the virtues of innovation and exhorted firms to innovate.

So Alice next did what any researcher tended to - she dived into the literature. Here, and rather to her surprise, she found the industry fervour for innovation had some basis in academic thought. Learned people said innovation was good for firms and the economic systems they inhabited (e.g. see Drucker, 1985, 2002; Johannessen, Olsen, & Lumpkin, 2001; Porter, 1990; Schumpeter, 1934; Tidd & Bessant, 2013b); and pundits presented Porter's proclamation that "Companies achieve competitive advantage through acts of innovation" (1990, p. 74).

However, Alice detected a note of caution too: innovation was "disruptive, risky and costly" (Tidd & Bessant, 2013b, p. 109); the process was "fraught with uncertainty" (OECD, 2005, p. 30) and the effort "could cost many resources, which could be wasted" (Sundbo, 2002, p. 66). Firms could even "innovate *and* die" (Hall & Williams, 2008, p. 29)! Now Alice started to wonder if innovation was more trouble than it was worth.

Still, many said innovation was needed to survive in tourism (e.g. Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010; OECD, 2006; OECD, 2010; Sundbo, Orfila-Sintes, & Sørensen, 2007; Weidenfeld, Williams, & Butler, 2010). Experts pointed out that innovation was "crucial to the establishment, growth and survival of firms" (Hall & Williams, 2008, p. 24). By now, Alice was thinking that *not* innovating was the path to business ruin!

With *that* last dire prognosis in mind, she set out to find a cure. Alas, she trod a ramshackle path: although innovation research was well advanced in manufacturing where "innovation theory has its roots" (Drejer, 2004, p. 551) it was a lot less advanced in tourism (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010; Sipe & Testa, 2009; Sundbo et al., 2007). So it seemed that neither the meaning nor means of tourism innovation was clear (Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 1994, 2002, 2009, 2010; Sipe & Testa, 2009). Alice wondered if innovation might be a 'buzzword' like Hjalager (2010, p. 1) said. Gloomily, she pondered the possibility that the industry quest for innovation was a 'fool's errand'; leastways, chasing something without knowing what it was seemed to be a foolish thing to do!

Alice rightly reckoned that to find *anything* you had to know what it was. So she determined to nut out what 'innovation' was. It proved a tough nut though: most definitions focussed on "newness" (Johannessen et al., 2001, p. 20) and novelty (Slappendel, 1996, p. 107); as one sage said, "all innovations must contain a degree of novelty" (OECD, 2005, p. 57). '*That didn't sound very helpful',* thought Alice as she tried to imagine what 'novelty' looked like. She mused that it was mainly a matter of perspective: novelty was "in the eye of the beholder" (Tidd & Bessant, 2013b, p. 30) so innovations could be 'new-to-the-firm', 'new-to-the-market' or 'new-to-the-world' (OECD, 2005; Tidd & Bessant, 2013b).

Innovation was a process with at least two parts too: creativity/invention *and* implementation/exploitation (e.g. Damanpour, 1996; Fuglsang & Sundbo, 2002; Hjalager, 2002, 2010; Hjalager, Cooper, & Lockwood, 1994; Kanter, 1996; Sundbo, 2002; Tidd & Bessant, 2013b; Unsworth & Parker, 2003). '*Well, that settled that!*' thought Alice, rather pleased to be making some progress at last: innovation existed when 'novelty' was put into effect; new-to-firm innovation was "the minimum entry level" (OECD, 2005, p. 57); and an innovative firm had "implemented at least one innovation" (OECD, 2005, p. 58)!

Now Alice could turn to 'how'. Alas, the explanations spanned the gamut of structure and agency - from individuals to organisations to the institutional frameworks surrounding their sum (Damanpour, 1996; Hjalager, 2009; Johannessen et al., 2001; Sundbo et al., 2007). People discussed "systems of innovation" (Edquist, 2005; Hjalager, 2009; Sundbo et al., 2007), networks (Liburd, Carlsen, & Edwards, 2013; Novelli, Schmitz, & Spencer, 2006; Sundbo et al., 2007), knowledge flows (Weidenfeld et al., 2010), workplace behaviour (e.g. West & Altink, 1996; West & Farr, 1990) and organisation conditions too (Kanter, 1996; Tidd & Bessant, 2013a). Alice's head spun! She found the different perspectives interesting but "being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing" (Carroll, 1866, p. 60)! '*How to look at it?*' she wondered. Thankfully, at that moment she remembered innovation was "fundamentally about entrepreneurship" (Tidd & Bessant, 2013b, p. 8) – it happened when entrepreneurs implemented new ideas (e.g. Drucker, 1985; Drucker, 2002; Kanter, 1996; Schumpeter, 1934; Tidd & Bessant, 2013b).

Then Alice encountered a curious contradiction: although tourism was "a phenomenon characterized by immense innovativeness" (Hjalager, 2010, p. 1), most firms were *not* very innovative (Hjalager, 2002, 2010; Sundbo et al., 2007; Weidenfeld et al., 2010). It was a puzzling puzzle and Alice pondered the possibility of something peculiar about innovative firms. The question was '*How to find out?*' Alice determined to find some innovative tourism firms and ask people 'in-the-know'; though rare as they were the problem was '*How to find them?*' Then, she struck upon an idea: '*Ask people in firms that had won awards for innovation!*' And *that* was how she met Jenny and John. By asking each a few questions (a semi-structured interview) two terrific tales she was told…

Two Terrific Tales

The Tale of John

John's story started back when he was 21: *"I worked in construction and I had my own business building wharves and bridges".* One day John was asked to lead a project to construct an adventure climb on a bridge. Although he worked on the technical side, he found himself *"more interested in the tourism side"; s*o he started *"looking around [the city] to see if I could identify any other opportunities for tourism".* He *"just wanted to move from construction into tourism"* as he liked the interaction with people and the opportunity to travel to meet people: *"rather than being stuck in that hard grind of construction. I suppose I saw it as more of a special type of career."*

John thought that the biggest two assets were the river and the cliffs: *"the biggest and best asset that I had identified was the [river]. We also had the [cliffs] and…I realised that it was very difficult to organise any climbing or abseiling or any kind of activity on that cliff as an individual or traveller. And with the river, there didn't seem to be anywhere close to town where you could hire kayaks or go out on a tour".* So John decided to bring outdoor adventure into the city: *"I just wanted to come up with a concept that would allow people to enjoy the beauty of [city] and the river's edge and just be 'one with the outside'".* So in 2005, he started a business providing activities on the river and the cliffs. That kindled his interest in height activities: *"I really started to enjoy the climbing side of things and the aerial side."* Later, John expanded to a nearby resort island: *"And we had also then started business opportunities out at [island resort]…diving, parasailing, all the water sports on the island…Segway on the beach, massage and beauty, eco-marine tours."*

One day, a cruise ship operator asked John to develop some concepts for their ships: *"they wanted something new on their ships because the cruise industry was becoming very, very competitive; so they approached me and said 'look can you come up with some ideas for our ship".* They had noticed what John had been doing and his technical skills suited their needs: *"I was quite fortunate…having a marine background… and being a boilermaker…I also have another degree which allows me to design…so I was able to design, construct and also operate…they were interested in all three so it was a really good fit".* As John recalls, the cruise line management basically said: *"we'll put you on a couple of cruises and give you a number of months to have a look around and present to us how you think an adventure*

activity program would fit with these particular ships". So John visited each of the ships to watch the passengers, talk with the crew and formulate some concepts.

Safety proved to be the biggest challenge: *"the largest challenge was convincing the Captain and the ship's staff that it's a good idea to create something…that has the ability to add to the list of risks and accidents on board".* Safety was also a concern for the senior management: *"to make sure there wasn't anything in there that customers or passengers might have perceived as being not safe working practices".* John's acumen helped allay these concerns, *"it was a matter of making them feel at ease with the good safety record I have in my other businesses".* The incorporation of relevant technology helped too: *"there had been some advances in technology, in safety… like automatic belay systems".* John knew this from his 'fact finding' missions: "*I travel the world each year looking at different systems and different places, making sure that if there's anything new and available that I can grab it"*

The implementation of the project was relatively straightforward - *"it was similar to the product I put together with [the island resort]".* As well, from his businesses on the island John had experience with same customers the cruise line had: *"I know that market, I know what they want, and I feel confident I can deliver for them".*

Using the ship's architecture John managed to deliver over 20 unique, fun and challenge activities for cruise ship passengers, effectively turning each ship into an adventure park at sea. An impeccable safety record was achieved: *"you couldn't count on one hand the number of minor injuries that have happened…so the ship is happy because the passengers are happy."* The success led to the extension to other ships and each time it was easier: *"with each ship, the challenges become less and less and I've learned a lot as we've delivered on each ship so they become easier and easier".* In 2014 John won accolade for the innovation of providing new types of adventure products on cruise ships.

The Tale of Jenny

It began 15 years ago when *"another Marine Biologist (Paul)… and I were asked to look after a turtle by the government.* Jenny, a veterinarian and a qualified marine biologist, was happy to help because she cared about the plight of the turtles. So Jenny and Paul found an old aquarium they could use, but it was a temporary arrangement; so they needed to find a permanent facility. One day, a local businessman decided to let her use a building in town so she could continue her work, and so it went on there: *"we used to get 4-5 turtles every year…just the two of us doing it, we got another couple of volunteers on board and we got a*

few more turtles over the years". Everything went along nicely until a calamity struck − freakish weather destroyed the inshore turtle habitat and caused mass turtle stranding: *"the inshore sea grass beds…were actually wiped out so we had mass stranding of thousands of green sea turtles"*. There were far too many sick turtles for Jenny's small operation. Many turtles died.

Jenny determined to find a bigger facility then, but it was only an idea − without money or a site she no way to make it happen. One day, another local businessman said Jenny could use some land on a nearby island, *"and so the idea was hatched that we build over there"*. Jenny had no money so *"it was whatever we could beg or borrow"*. Jenny and Paul started clearing the land by hand.

Before long others joined in: *"we were really lucky…. We had another four people come over'*. Then a chance meeting with a local politician delivered vital equipment: *"One day I ran into [politician] and I said…"We really need your help" And he said, "Ok what do you need?" And I said "A Bobcat would be great" …and on the barge next week was a Bobcat! That made a lot of difference…"* It was still hard: *"we battled, we really battled, we really did it tough, and we ran out of money so many times.* The effort was worth it because the endangered turtles *"needed somebody to look after them"*. Many people in the local community regarded the turtles as a barometer of the health reef, which was a major tourist drawcard: *"turtles are indicators of the [reef] - if you've got sick turtles you've got a sick reef"*.

One day the media did a story about it: *"I think I did a bit of TV and I think I said, you know, we really need [workers and tradespeople]…and we had people with hands up left, right and centre"*. From then on, when she needed help she would contact the media or put an advertisement in the newspaper, bringing astonishing results: *"plumbers and electricians…and carpenters….they would ring up and say 'We'd love to come and help, what can we do?'"* And that was how the facility was completed. Once the turtle rehabilitation aspect was running smoothly Jenny started the tours. The tours became popular: *"now we have people that come over on the boat…just to see the turtles"*. More students and researchers visited too: *"now I have university students from all around the world and also from interstate in Australia…vet students, ecology students, conservation students…."*

The community continued to support it: *"The tourism bodies… are fabulous to us… they pick up turtles things like that… sponsor turtles…and all our volunteers travel free of charge"*. The volunteer network has grown too: *"they're absolutely fantastic…they give up a*

day of their life every week to come out and help". The local federal politician even started talking about *"building a purpose built threatened species centre…so we can actually have a true educational centre…with a research component as well"*.

In 2014 Jenny won industry accolade for innovatively combining tourism with a turtle rehabilitation program. It delivered a win-win-win: a memorable turtle experience for visitors; an educational message encouraging conservation behaviour; and funds to support the rehabilitation work and conservation research.

An End

To Alice, each story was fascinating: Jenny and John had each somehow managed to do something innovative. In a way, each story followed the plot of the Quest (Kent, 2015), wherein "some major incident" sparks a search for a "person, place, or thing" (2015, p. 486) and in which the action traces three parts: uncertain start, stern challenges and the finale of the questors' triumphant win. Something had inspired Jenny and John to set out after an idea not knowing exactly how it might turn out: John did not know what the activities on the ships might be; and Jenny had a vision but barely knew where to start! Each searched for answers as they went, encountering twists and turns that shaped how it turned out. Each faced stern challenges: John faced tough questions about passenger risk, and Jenny just "battled and battled". Somehow they triumphed and brought their ideas to life.

Of course, Alice realized each story was more than an entertaining tale – as situated local accounts, the stories depicted the messy, real-life practice of entrepreneurship (de Montoya, 2004). The entrepreneurial tales, or "e-tales" (Smith & Anderson, 2004) were sense-making and sense-giving (de Montoya, 2004; Foss, 2004; Rae, 2000; Smith & Anderson, 2004). The question was: *what sense could she make of it?*

One thing Alice noticed was that Jenny and John managed to get all the resources they needed, though the ways and means they used differed: John had ample internal resources, but Jenny needed lots of outside help. Both had help from others, but that varied too: for Jenny, external relations (media, political and business) furnished many vital resources; but John relied on only a few relationships (senior management and shipboard staff) to craft and implement the idea. Alice supposed these stories jibed with the idea that networks aided innovation in tourism firms (Liburd et al., 2013; Sundbo et al., 2007). However, Alice noticed something else too: in each story the entrepreneurs *adapted* to the situation, using certain relationships to get just what they needed.

It was said that knowledge was helpful to tourism innovation (Hjalager, 2002, 2009, 2010; Liburd et al., 2013; OECD, 2005, 2006, 2010) and Alice could see this in the stories too. John habitually went on fact-finding missions – a case of observation/imitation of distant, similar products/attractions like Weidenfeld et al. (2010) said. John was a "knowledge transfer agent" (Weidenfeld et al., 2010) building "knowledge stocks" (Weidenfeld et al., 2010). Jenny, however, did not seek external product knowledge because she already knew what facility was needed - her internal "knowledge stock" was enough. So Alice noticed that adaptability again: somehow they both *knew* what knowledge was needed *and* how to fill in the gaps.

The adaptability struck Alice as strikingly similar – be it resources, relationships or knowledge, they just seemed to know just what was needed and how to get it too. Perhaps it was not all that surprising. As de Montoya (2004, p. 59) said; "even the most benign of business environments is constantly in flux" so entrepreneurs must be able to "process the events that flow around them". So the fact that adaptability was present and needed was not at issue – the quintessential question for Alice was *"How?"*

Alice reflected that Jenny and John each seemed to have an in-depth understanding of their realm. As a vet and marine biologist with long experience in running a turtle rehabilitation facility, Jenny was able to conceive a new facility including education and tours; and John's skills in construction, design and rope activities had equipped him to design such activities on cruise ships. Alice noticed that passion had helped each to see and seize opportunities that others somehow missed; the passion was longstanding too: John had enjoyed heights and outdoor activities for 20 years and Jenny had been involved in turtle rehabilitation for more than 15 years. Soon Alice sensed a starting point: perhaps it was the passion that fuelled the acquisition of the knowledge that enabled the innovation quest! Alice then remembered that perceived risk was a known barrier to innovation; still, innovators continued anyway. That gave her an idea that made some sense: that accumulated knowledge conferred both the ability understand risks and the 'know-how' to address them. Armed with that in-depth knowledge, they could formulate ideas and realise them – by adapting to the situation at hand

It seemed to Alice that the moral of the story was that they succeeded because they knew a great deal about what they were doing - they understood their innovation arena. They had built this knowledge over time and that accumulated stock of knowledge enabled them to take the next step forward, to do something new. That habit of learning is what had made them masters of their art.

The stories now took a new prosaic turn. They were not just a plot of Quest, but a plot of Discovery too (Kent, 2015): a tale about how entrepreneurs choose to live or make a living (de Montoya, 2004), about being open to possibility and learning along the way. Perhaps, in the end, mused Alice, it was a story of "becoming" (Foss, 2004), or of incremental innovation at personal scale. Alice thought her namesake summed the wider story nicely thus:

> *"Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!"* (Carroll, 1866, p. 19)

At least that was one way to look at it, thought Alice. After all, as a tale about tales describing "the chaos of life" (de Montoya, 2004, p. 75) it was always going to be "a new story, a new construction, bearing some resemblance to what might be 'out there' in the world, ever unfolding, and inviting interpretation." (de Montoya, 2004, pp. 77-78) Not really *the* end then, but *an* end.

Afterword

Narratives offer a way to make sense of entrepreneurship (de Montoya, 2004; Foss, 2004; Rae, 2000; Smith & Anderson, 2004), including the entrepreneurial activity of innovation (Drucker, 1985). Stories are a basic form of human communication (Kent, 2015; Rae, 2000). As Kent (2015, p. 488) says: "the idea of humans as "homonarrans" or story telling animals is well established". Narratives "are a central means of communicating the entrepreneurial message" (Smith & Anderson, 2004, p. 126) and the messy stories of entrepreneurship (de Montoya, 2004; Smith & Anderson, 2004) trace well-known master plots that describe the stories of life (Kent, 2015).

A prosaic view of entrepreneurship invites contemplation of sense-giving forms too (Steyaert, 2004). As Steyaert (2004, p. 21) puts it: "To draw upon the novel to conceive entrepreneurship is then to acknowledge the similar authorship the writing of life presupposes as in literary writing. The question is then: What forms, genres and styles of writing can become implied here?"

The research story boils down to the notion that if questions are sufficiently intriguing to merit research then the answers might be useful for others to know. Institutional scholars have long said as much in grounding the research effort in the basic premise that universities exist to disseminate knowledge to society (e.g. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1967; PhillipsKPA, 2006; Roper & Hirth, 2005; Ticha & Havlicek, 2008). Perhaps a more relatable version is that researchers like asking questions and telling others about the answers that they find. Yet, the language and form of academic writing remain exclusive - legible only to those that are 'in-the-know'.

The sense-giving power of a story depends on the way it is told (Kent, 2015). Popular literature is entertaining and relatable; yet although social science researchers study the eminently relatable subject of the social world, the stories are rarely so. Where are the entertaining stories about social life and the characters that comprise it? Research has all the ingredients for a tale of Discovery – a burning question, a search for answers and a resolution of sorts. However, as the Discovery plot "answers life's questions using characters and situations that seem real and concrete" (Kent, 2015, p. 485) the question beckons: *Where is the researcher – the main character in the research story?* Perhaps this could be a way to make the entrepreneurship research story more entertaining and relatable; and respond, in some measure, to Steyaert's call for moving to "a more prosaic scene" (2004, p. 2).

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