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Critically evaluate a range of methodological approaches, research designs and research methods appropriate to gather data from complex work-based settings. Apply due consideration to research ethics and issues of insider research.

Introduction

The Cambridge dictionary (2024) lists the word 'research' as an in-depth study into a topic allowing you to reach a new depth of understanding or new conclusions. Research is important in all areas of life. It enables us to continue to learn and develop knowledge whether as individuals, a group or even as a nation. Munn (2008) describes the importance of the continued growth of knowledge. She mentions that knowledge does not stay still, we must continue to expand it in order to correct errors of the past and gain a deeper understanding of a topic. Music and vocal related research are no different. Huron (2021) remarks that music is an important part of people's lives. Therefore, continued research into music, and more specifically vocal studies, is important.

In this assignment I will seek to explore the many branches of research that may be used in a complex work-based setting, and critically reflect upon their potential and actual use in vocal research. I will also endeavour to explore my own view points in order to understand my own bias and point of view as a potential researcher.

Ontology

The foundations of the word Ontology rest with Aristotle's writings from around 437BC. Its core principals are centred around an understanding of reality and the nature of reality. (Stevens, Rector & Hull 2010). Sheppard (2020) states that ontology provokes some very big questions such as what is the purpose of our lives and does objectivity reality really exist? Ontology can be separated into two aspects; objectivism and subjectivism.

Objectivism and Subjectivism – Wood (2023) states that objectivism is the view that reality exists independently of what a person may think or believe about it. On the other hand, he explains that subjectivism is the belief that reality is different for each person and is shaped by their feelings or beliefs.

On reflection I feel my personal belief sides with objectivism. I have come to this conclusion as I believe there are facts and absolutes in the world that exist despite what I may feel or think

about them. As I undertake research in the future it is important for me to take this into account in order to understand my own bias. Bias in research can occur in many areas, (Widen 2024) ranging from a bias question at the outset of the research, a bias selection of participants or a bias data collection or interpretation. Therefore, it is vital that a researcher's bias is taken into account in order to make the research undertaken ethical, accurate and valuable (Smith & Noble 2017).

Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, how we know what we know, where the knowledge comes from and how it is gathered. The word itself is formed from the Greek word's 'episteme' meaning understanding or knowledge and 'logos' which can be translated as reason. (Steup, Matthias & Ram Neta 2024). Epistemology can be separated into various different strands; these include objectivism, subjectivism and constructionism. However, two of the main branches used are Positivism and Interpretivism. These branches are often used as they are at opposite ends of the Epistemological spectrum (Brown 2024).

Positivism and Interpretivism- Brown (2024) says that Positivism is a highly structured scientific outlook on research and knowledge. In this type of research, a large data collection is undertaken in a quantitative manner (this term will be discussed in more detail later). The data will then be looked at objectively and with high levels of generalisability due to the large participant numbers. However, Park et al (2020) describe positivism in research to be more based upon finding facts, and less on an individual's own experiences and values. This interpretation seems to discount the fact that large data collections will only allow for a generalised view on the data collected and thus the facts found may be limited. Hiller (2016) describes Interpretivism as the acknowledgement that all knowledge comes from our life experiences and is not objective. Bruscia (2005) agrees with this and goes on to suggest that interpretivist research is most suited to understanding the world as it is according to an individual's experiences.

Axiology

Hart (1971) defines Axiology as the theory and nature of values. He explains that Axiology addresses the age-old concern of the quest for values in amongst the order of reality and nature, and humans place in it. Gope (2022) further adds to Hart's definition by explaining that Axiology explores the relationship between our knowledge and our values and by questioning how we know what is valuable. Axiology can be separated into 2 main branches, Ethics and Aesthetics (Peter & Onwundinjo 2022).

Ethics and Aesthetics- Gope (2022) explains that the ethics side of axiology is about behaviour and aims to provide a guide of what is right and wrong. She argues that ethics is a crucial issue for our times as our world battles to separate good from evil. Gope explains that aesthetics on the other hand deals with the value of 'things'. This could range from a piece of art through to a building's architecture or a piece of music.

Paradigms

A paradigm can be described as a model or pattern for research. It can also be viewed as a group of values, assumptions and practices that helps the viewing of reality. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). Kuhn (1962) described paradigms as a necessity for scientific research, stating that following a set of rules or beliefs is needed in order to maintain a professional research practice. There are many research paradigms available that would aid different types of research. Each will bring its own strengths and weaknesses (Choy 2014). I will endeavour to explore 3, Subjectivism, Transformative, and Pragmatic as I feel they may be most useful in vocal research.

Subjectivism- This paradigm allows researchers to take numerous perspectives into account and holds that each person has their own reality based on their life experiences and feelings. (Howell 2013). In 1999, Bastick described this paradigm as a new learning paradigm that deals with the experiences of individuals and the importance of their personal perspectives. He continues to say that the constructivist paradigm was set to lead educational research into the new century. However, for all its positives it lacked the ability to take into consideration the emotions or feelings of an individual which is where the subjectivist paradigm excels. However, Weston (1984) seems to disagree with Bastick. Weston states that the Subjective paradigm is fairly easy to grasp and popular in research. He feels that this paradigm does not support the need for the structure of values in research and that it limits critical thinking.

Use in vocal research

As this paradigm deals with an individual's view of reality it could be useful in much music research. For example, it could be used in a study of how the menopause affects a woman's voice. Subjectivism here would allow the researcher to show that each woman is affected in a different way and that each has a valid view of the reality of the changes occurring in their voice. Howell (2013) does highlight a potential flaw of this paradigm. He explains that it relies heavily on the researcher being involved in the research, maybe through means of interview for example (research interviews will be discussed in more detail below). This could mean that the views of the researcher may become part of the research and it cannot be considered as

unbiased. It must also be noted that this paradigm does not deal with facts, so any music research that aims to produce factual data may be better suited to another paradigm.

Transformative- Mertens (2017) explains that this paradigm came into being in response to certain groups of society being unheard, unrepresented or pushed to the edge of society. She continues to state that the voice of these marginalised groups needed to be heard in the world of research and thus this paradigm was created. She explains that her life experiences and contact with marginalised groups such as deaf people and people of colour lead her to realise that researchers had a duty to all such groups. She strongly emphasises that researchers must be aware of their own beliefs and bias in order to work within this paradigm in an ethically correct and respectful manner. This paradigm holds that there are multiple realities and that these are shaped by an individual's social background, gender, culture, disability and so on (Mertens 2007).

Use in vocal research

I feel this paradigm would fit well with some music research. For example, Gackle (2019) observes that many books and articles have been written over hundreds of years exploring the change of a boy's voice during adolescent. Gackle states that girls voice change in adolescence is much less known and discussed, despite the fact that recent studies show that female singers significantly outnumber male singers in most choral programs. Girls of this age are underrepresented in research and more work needs to be done in order to help them negotiate what can be a complex time vocally. Research with this group, within this paradigm, would ensure that adolescent female voice change is studied in an ethical way with each individual being given the chance to let their version of reality be known. As I have a particular interest in this area of voice study, I would be most likely to use this paradigm in my future research.

Pragmatic- This paradigm is often referred to as a mixed method paradigm. It works outside of a ridged framework and functions to simply work in the best way to find answers and solutions to research questions (Revez, Borges 2019). Allemang et al. (2022) state that the pragmatic approach is most helpful in dealing with complicated social issues that need a multifactor approach in order to reach solutions or conclusions. They continue to state that this paradigm allows solutions to be reached by using multiple source's and either quantitative or qualitative data collections (these data collection devices are explained below). Flexibility is at its very core and the researcher will seek to use human experience to further understand knowledge rather than relying on any absolute truths.

Use in vocal research

As this paradigm is flexible it could be useful in many areas of voice related research that do not require an absolute truth to be acquired. These could include research into why people enjoy listening to some songs and not others. This research topic would allow each listeners experiences, likes and dislikes to be taken into account. The fact that there was no absolute truth reached as a conclusion, but rather differing experiences, would not hinder the outcome of the research.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research

McLeod (2023) describes quantitative research as the collection of numerical objective data and qualitative research as the collection of subjective opinions, experiences and thoughts. He concludes that both methods are useful but that both also have limitations. He states that because quantitative research produces numerical data that can be based on the theories of statistics and mathematics, it can be deemed as objective and rational in its findings and is less open to the bias of the researchers' own thoughts and beliefs. He goes on to say that it's limitations can lie in the fact that it deals only with numbers. For example, your research may show the number of people affected by vocal nodules, but you will have no data as to why they experienced vocal nodules. On the other hand, Mwita (2022) states that qualitative data collection is often used in natural science research as it provides conclusive answers to a question. He also however, points out that as the data collected is from individuals and by individuals it can be subject to bias and inaccuracy.

Mixed Method Use

Often more rounded and accurate research is undertaken by using a mix of both methods of data collection thus reducing their individual limitations (Creswell, Plano Clark 2007). Jogulu and Pansiri (2011) explain that mixed methods allows you to take elements from both qualitative and quantitative methods and combine them in order to allow researchers to undertake research from a flexible inductive and abductive viewpoint. Creswell (2014) states that the use of both of these data collection devices provides much better research results. However, Hansen et al. (2016) also list some limitations to the use of mixed methods. They state the use of mixed method research designs could increase the overall time the research takes and will require the researcher to have in-depth knowledge of both methods which may again delay the research taking place.

Research Designs

A research design is the framework that researchers use to conduct a study. It will provide a clear plan for the research that may involve how data will be collected, how and who will

analyse the data, ethical considerations and the research timeframe. (Singh 2023). Which research design is followed depends largely on the type of research being undertaken (Creswell 2008). Research designs include hermeneutics, experiment, cross sectional and cohort design. Whilst these and all other research designs are valuable, I feel the four covered below would best fit my needs in educational vocal research as they allow the researcher to deal directly with the participants. However, because I would be directly involved in the research, my bias and beliefs would need to be taken into consideration in any findings to make sure they are objective and reliable.

Case study- Priya (2020) states that this is one of the most commonly used research designs in social research. Creswell (2014) adds that a case study falls under qualitative research and that it is usually time constricted. Case studies generally focus in on an individual (although sometimes multiple individuals may be used) using a variety of data collection tools (Cherry 2024). A case study would give excellent in-depth research opportunities for example, to study boys voice change. Here, it would provide in depth research on the effects of voice change to all the boys involved in the research. However, Yinn (2004) points out that the sampling plan must be rigorous if the research is to be of any value to the wider population outside of the study.

Action research- aims to investigate and solve a problem simultaneously. This means that as a researcher is gathering information about a certain issue, they are also putting in place actions to solve the issue based on the information they gather (George 2024). Stringer et al. (2010) explain that action research is particularly helpful in an educational setting. They note that this type of research design is flexible and allows the teacher to ensure that each pupil is being taught in the way that is most suited to their abilities. If one type of teaching is not helping the pupil, the teacher is able to enquire or observe why and adjust their approach during the lesson. As a vocal teacher I undertake in this type of research on a daily basis adjusting my teaching to match each pupil's abilities and requirements.

Ethnography- Involves observing individuals or small groups in their day-to-day environment. Rather than focusing in on data collection the subjects' behaviours are observed and then analysed for the purpose of the research, thus allowing an in-depth insight into the subjects (Singh 2023). Ethnography was famously used by Margaret Mead in 1928, who moved to remote Islands of the world in order to research the lifestyle and culture of the indigenous people. By immersing herself in her subject's world's her research was accurate and reliable (Hearing 2023). For vocal teaching this research design allows a teacher to observe a student

in their lesson and to assess their own teaching methods as well as the students learning attitude.

Longitudinal study- This design allows researchers to observe (see below for more details on observations in research) their participants over a set period of time, which may be days, months or even years (Simkus 2023). Thomas (2020) explains that this allows researchers to see changes in real time helping to collect cause and effect' data (i.e., what has happened to the participant during the timespan studied to cause the changes that have been observed). But Thomas continues to explain that there are disadvantages of this type of study as longer timespans can incur more costs and participants may drop out part way through the study. An excellent example of a vocal longitudinal study was undertaken by Willis & Kenny (2011). It was entitled 'Voice training and changing weight' and endeavoured to study 20 girls aged 12-13 years over the course of a year. The findings allowed them to collect data on girl's voice change and how pitch, voice breaks, and confidence were affected by changing body weight. Whilst this study collected much helpful data, it would have been interesting to see it continued beyond a year as not all girls pass through their adolescent stages at the age of 12-13.

Research Methods

Some commonly used research methods include focus groups, document analysis and surveys (University of Newcastle Australia 2024). The methods used for data collection in research will be guided by the type of research that is to be undertaken, resources available, timeframes, what type of end data is required and many other factors (Payne 2020). For example, if your research is to be undertaken on an individual then interview or observation may fit best, if the research is to be undertaken on a group, then a survey or focus group may work best. Choosing the correct method is essential to the success and reliability of the research (Thattamparambil 2020). Below are 3 methods which I feel may fit well with vocal research.

Interview- This is a qualitative way of collecting data. Beck & Manuel (2008) state that interviews are an excellent way of gathering data if you want to understand and explore human issues more clearly and in depth. Interviews can be conducted in a structured manner (asking the same set of questions to each participant with no flexibility) semi structured manner (having guiding questions with some flexibility to adapt) or unstructured manner (no set questions are asked but the researcher should have a clear brief in their mind to allow data to be collected) (Wilson 2012). Interview is an excellent tool for vocal research as the questions can be carefully crafted to collect in-depth data. However, it must be remembered that

the data collected may be biased by the researchers' questions, or affected by the participant being nervous.

Focus Group- A focus group can give valuable insight into a group's thoughts on a subject (Kairuz, Crump and O'Brien, 2007). Krueger & Casey (2009, p.2) describe a focus groups as, "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment". Data is collected in a qualitative way and may be useful in vocal research if, for example, you are studying boys voice change. Using a focus group to collect data would provide an overall feeling of how boys felt as their voices changed. However, this method does have its limitations. Often people may feel less able to share openly in a group setting due to peer pressure (Ananian 2004). This may be especially so for adolescents who often feel great pressure to try to be like their peers and so may not share accurate information in this setting (Daley 2013). From this it may be concluded that an individual interview may sometimes be a more accurate way of collecting data than a focus group for this age group. However, Kissling (1996) drew the conclusion that focus groups may actually encourage the sharing of data, especially data of a sensitive nature, as once one participant has shared others in the group may feel more in powered and emboldened to do the same. If a focus group was used the researcher would have to carefully consider how they chose and even seated their participants in order to collect the most accurate data (Adler, Salantera, Zumstien-Shaha 2019).

Observation- This qualitative way of collecting data is generally looked upon as the least obtrusive of all research methods as a subject can be observed in their natural surroundings where they feel most comfortable (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). This is useful in educational settings (Punch & Oancea 2014) and vocal research. A vocal teacher could observe and analyse their student without the student being particularly aware that anything apart from their usual singing lesson was taking place. Limitations to this method may occur when people know they are being observed, as this may cause them to act unnaturally. For example, a teacher being observed by a supervisor may teach in a very different style to that that they usually use, simply because they want to impress their superior (Mcleod 2024).

Ethics and Insider research

Ethics- It is important that all research is undertaken in an ethical manner as this will point the researcher towards what is desirable and good rather than destructive (Sandu et al. 2019). Ethics in research can cover the manner in which the participants are treated, how data is collected and how the data is used after the research has concluded (Alldred et al. 2002). As a

teacher of young people, the ethics of any research I undertake with them is most important. The National Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2024) states that any research conducted with children and young people must be undertaken carefully. There must be clear benefits to the research and the needs of the research data being collected must not harm the child or hinder their voice being heard. Murphy (2003) clearly demonstrates the importance of these issues by looking back at the history of research with children. He states that in the 1930's a medical doctor, William Black, selected 23 child patients at random and injected them with the herpes virus in order to collect data from their symptoms. Whilst we have thankfully moved along way forward from Black's research, when I undertake research in this area I must endeavour to follow certain ethics guidelines. These would include obtaining consent from the young person and their parent or guardian, giving a clear picture of what the research question was, how the data would be used and by whom, explaining how the data will be collected and stored and so on (Mahr 2024). All of this will be time consuming so the researcher will have to factor this and their application to the Ethics Council into the timeframe for their research (Rana & Dilshad 2021).

Insider Research- Insider research can be described as research where the researcher is involved with and has a knowledge of the studies participants before the study begins (Saidin & Yaacob 2016). This is contrasted with outsider research where there is no prior knowledge of the participants before the research is undertaken (Griffin 1998). Both have pros and cons. For example, an insider researcher will already have a relationship with the participants which may make them more relaxed and able to participate in a more natural way enabling more reliable data to be collected (Oliver 2020). On the other hand, an outsider researcher will not bring any pre conceived thoughts on the participants and so may collect more objective and unbiased data (Griffin 1998). If I undertake research with my singing pupils, I will be an insider researcher and will have to take into consideration any bias and opinions I already have on the chosen participants in order to make the data I collect most accurate.

Conclusion

It can be seen that undertaking research is no easy task, and nor indeed should be it so (Dasgupta 2018). The many considerations ranging from setting the correct research question, to considering the researchers own beliefs and views, to correctly picking participants and choosing how to collect your data will be time consuming and must be undertaken correctly. However, when this is all done in an ethical and proper manner the outcomes can be invaluable. There is much wonderful vocal research still to be done in many areas, and now I have a much clearer understanding of what is required I hope to be able to add to this with my own research.

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