Title: 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.

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Introduction

As a vocal coach at Urdang International based in UAE (United Arab Emirates), I work with post-16 students preparing for professional Musical Theatre (MT) training. My focus is on pedagogical approaches that support legit MT technique in young female voices. The term *legit* refers to a classical vocal production often viewed as more technically aligned with traditional singing than belting (Bourne & Kenny, 2016). Classical technique characterised by tall, rounded vowels, continuous vibrato, produces a self-amplifying sound suited to both classical and traditional MT styles (Edwin, 2007). Drawing on *bel canto* principles from the 17th–19th centuries, it can exemplify smooth phrasing and elongated vowels to support agility (Stark, 2003). This module marks my first step in moving from vocal coach to research practitioner.

Chowdhury (2018) has the viewpoint that academic research is a disciplined and methodical way of seeking answers. McIntyre (2005) emphasises the necessity for practitioners to critically examine their own practice through research, identifying gaps in knowledge and areas where change may be required. Similarly, Boudah (2020) describes research as a systematic way of articulating a topic of interest and pursuing a deeper understanding. This resonates with my desire to explore how *bel canto* and Western Classical approaches can be woven together to address the needs of emerging MT performers specifically as Flynn (2020) uncovers in their research, the importance of merging vocal health into undergraduate vocational training. My research is situated within my own teaching environment, I approach it explicitly as an insider researcher, fully aware that my professional responsibilities, relationships and ethical obligations shape the research process. Insider research and related ethical considerations are acknowledged here and will be examined in greater depth later in this paper.

The overarching aim of this paper is to examine how ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions influence my research decisions, and how these philosophical perspectives will inform my own research. To do so, I will explore three paradigms, social constructionism, pragmatism and the transformative paradigm, each of which will aim to inform my practitioner research and strengthen the rigour of this work-based inquiry. I will also evaluate a range of research designs and methods which align with my paradigms. I will discuss these paradigms, designs and methods with reference to my own teaching context, highlighting their practical relevance and application for conducting work-based research in MT. Cochran-Smith *et al* (2009) argue that the longstanding value placed on inquiry as a means of understanding teaching can be preserved even when the focus shifts from the teacher's learning to the learning of their students. In this context, each paradigm offers a framework for analysing practice, interpreting learner experiences and supporting the reflective processes that underpin practitioner inquiry.

This paper aims to provide a research blueprint to guide my development as a practitioner-researcher and strengthen my pedagogical approach to Pre-1965 legit MT training. By reflecting

critically on philosophical assumptions, research paradigms, and methodological choices, I aim to bridge the gap between pedagogy and evidence-informed practice.

Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology

Cohen *et al* (2018) support how research is grounded in philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, how we come to know it, and what we value within the inquiry process. Understanding the interplay of ontology, epistemology, and axiology can provide a strong foundation for selecting research paradigms and methods that align with one's professional context (Edelheim, 2014; Sol & Heng, 2022). Terms such as ontology, epistemology and axiology form the foundation of how individuals make sense of the world (Edelheim, 2014) shaping our understanding of truth, knowledge and the values we hold personally and collectively within society (Sol, & Heng, 2022). Ontology is the study of being and reality; it questions what the form and nature of reality is and, therefore, what can be known about it (Gruber, 1993; Guarino et al 2009). By taking a relativist ontological approach, I acknowledge multiple realities coexist within my studio, shaped both by subjective experiences of the singers themselves. Conversely, a relativist perspective recognises that each singer's experience is subjective and shaped by personal interpretation, cultural background and stylistic preference (Field,1982). This viewpoint values the individual's perception and negotiation of classical techniques within contemporary or diverse repertoire. By adopting both realist and relativist perspectives, a researcher can gain a fuller understanding of how technical mastery and subjective experience interact. This dual approach could help to inform strategies to support the development of a healthy, sustainable legit voice, equipping singers to meet the rigorous demands of the professional MT industry (Bowden, 1995; Pavlova, 2008; Zuim et al., 2024).

Epistemology, is concerned with how we know, what we know and what justifies us in believing what we believe, how knowledge is acquired by the researcher and more importantly what counts as valid knowledge (Audi, 2010). From an epistemological standpoint, I will adopt a constructivist position supported by an experiential approach. Chapman and Morris (2021) highlight that *Bel Canto* and Western Classical voice training benefit from a holistic framework in which knowledge is constructed through the interactive, lived experience between teacher and student, rather than treated as fixed, universal facts (Diekelmann, 2001). This perspective underpins my approach to investigating legit technique within MT, as it aligns with the collaborative and experiential nature of vocal learning in my own teaching context. It is important to acknowledge that, while singers interpret and experience their voices differently, there are objective physiological and acoustic realities that govern vocal production (Kayes, 2014). This view is consistent with Znaniecki (1934) Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) whom argue that socially constructed understandings can coexist with objective facts. A realist in research Hewitt *et al* (2012) believes is that certain aspects of reality exist independently of individual perceptions and can be observed, measured and evaluated objectively. In the context of MT vocal training, a realist approach allows the measurable effects of *Bel Canto* and Western Classical techniques on the technical development of singers particularly when working with pre-1965 legit repertoire to be systematically assessed (Björkner, 2008).

Axiology in research refers to what the researcher believes is valuable and ethical (Killam, 2013). Understanding these concepts is important as I position myself within the research landscape which I will endeavour to make informed methodological choices aligning with the values of work-based inquiry. Axiologically, my values centre on inclusivity and the growth of healthy, authentic vocal practices. Teaching in the UAE requires sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity, and my responsibility as an educator is to ensure that every student can succeed within the stylistic demands of legit MT regardless of their background. My ethical commitments, therefore, prioritise transparency, empowerment and the creation of a safe learning environment (Tsai, *et al* 2020). As a practitioner-researcher, my core values centre on promoting vocal health, and vocal longevity by using *Bel Canto* and Western classical techniques in the singing studio. I prioritise both the technical development of the voice and the singer's personal experience, ensuring that pedagogical decisions are informed by evidence and students needs. In line with this, Marchesi, (2014) supports how *Bel Canto* can provide a foundation for singers to develop a healthy voice when approaching Pre1965 MT repertoire. Core *Bel Canto* principles, such as consistent breath support, smooth legato lines, and open vowel formation can be adapted to meet the stylistic demands of MT repertoire, while maintaining vocal health and longevity (Saunders-Barton, 2005).

Research Paradigms

Research paradigms represent the philosophical framework that guide how researchers view reality, acquire knowledge and determine what is valuable within their field of study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Kamal, 2019). To enhance my journey from vocal coach to research practitioner I have decided to explore paradigms of social constructionism, pragmatism, and the transformative paradigm, each providing a philosophical foundation for understanding how knowledge, reality, and values intersect within work-based research (Morgan, 2014; Fergusson, 2020). These paradigms will inform my exploration of varying research methodologies to support my investigation into effective approaches for training Pre 1965 legit MT vocalists within a demanding contemporary genre (Benson, 2018).

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism positions knowledge as co-created through interaction, dialogue, and shared cultural understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This is highly relevant to vocal pedagogy, where technique and style are shaped through modelling, feedback and collaborative interpretation (Hruby, 2001; Delport, 2025). Ontologically, it assumes multiple realities exist (Andrews, 2012). In my context, students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence their expectations of legit sound; for example, vowel shaping is affected by a learner's native dialect (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015), and cultural norms shape vocal expressiveness and storytelling (Scherer, 2001; Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011). This aligns with Vygotskian ideas of learning as socially mediated (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995). A social constructionist stance could help illuminate how legit vocal identity develops through shared studio culture and teacher modelling (Vannini & Williams, 2016). However, the paradigm may have limitations with its focus on subjective interpretation

(Phillips, 2023). This may make it difficult to evaluate the physiological or technical outcomes central to vocal training. While it offers insight into the cultural and experiential factors shaping singers' development, it may not provide the technical precision required for pre-1965 legit MT. When applied to Bel Canto techniques such as those detailed in Lamperti's research (2009) the paradigm's emphasis on multiple realities risks may dilute the historical, aesthetic precision essential to Pre-1965 legit MT repertoire.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism prioritises what works in practice and embraces flexibility in selecting research methods that best answer a given question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Ontologically, pragmatism views reality as shaped by experience and context rather than fixed (Maarouf, 2019). Knowledge is valued when it helps solve practical problems (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997).

In my work, pragmatism could provide a useful framework for blending Western Classical, *Bel Canto* and contemporary MT pedagogies in ways that respond to diverse learners. Practically, this might involve pairing classical vowel-shaping exercises with contemporary strategies for speech-based exercises. This pragmatic stance aligns closely with Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses, which encourages the practitioner to evaluate teaching decisions through student feedback, self-reflection, colleague dialogue, and existing research (Ndebele, 2014). In doing so, pragmatism not only shapes my studio practice but also informs my methodological choices. It supports a mixed-methods approach, which typically aligns with an ontological position of pluralism, the view that multiple realities and forms of evidence can coexist and provide different but equally meaningful insights (Morgan, 2007). This stance could allow me to integrate measurable technical data with students' qualitative experiences. Bringing these strands together may enable me to balance technical precision with lived experience, ensuring any interventions remain both practically effective and pedagogically meaningful. Pragmatism therefore enables these methodological approaches to work in combination, prioritising the needs of both the research and the singers involved (Biesta, 2010).

Transformative Paradigm

Adopting the transformative paradigm, can acknowledge training environments, repertoire selection and performance practices, influenced by social, cultural, and institutional structures, which can affect representation and may perpetuate inequality among students. Ontologically, the transformative paradigm can view reality as shaped by these structures, highlighting how factors such as gendered expectations of the voice, Western Classical or cultural biases in Pre-1965 repertoire can impact teaching and learning (Cranton & Taylor, 2011). Epistemologically, it may position the knowledge as collaboratively constructed, aiming to empower students and support positive social change (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005). Axiologically, it could offer grounding to values of inclusivity, fairness, and respect for diversity, guiding the researcher and practitioner to make ethical, considered decisions when teaching in a work-based setting. In a vocational training

environment, the transformative paradigm may encourage myself as vocal coach to critically examine which voices and styles have historically been prioritised or marginalised in MT performance. It could foster an inclusive approach to Pre-1965 MT repertoire and could offer a reinforcement of the principle that research should not only generate knowledge but also actively promote equity, inclusivity, and the well-being of students (Cappiali, 2023).

Whilst the transformative paradigm can offer a valuable framework for addressing inequality, voice, and power within educational settings (Hurtado, 2015) several limitations could be useful to acknowledge. First, its strong emphasis on social justice may unintentionally introduce researcher bias. As the researcher enters the study with a commitment to promoting change, there is a risk that data may be interpreted in ways that support pre-existing agendas rather than allowing unexpected or contradictory findings to emerge (Mertens, 2007). Secondly, the transformative paradigm may require a strong collaboration with participants as (Romm, 2015). In a vocational singing studio, students may feel reluctant to voice disagreement or critique particularly where hierarchical relationships exist (Biddle & Schafft, 2015). This has the potential to limit the development of the student voice and compromise the paradigm's goals. Additionally, the paradigm's focus on challenging power structures can be culturally sensitive in the UAE context, where educational environments may operate within defined institutional and cultural expectations. As a result, encouraging students to take more ownership or challenge existing norms needs to be handled with sensitivity to the cultural context (O'Sullivan, 2015). Researchers (Avelino *et al,* 2019) note that transformative work can risk overextending the concept of empowerment assuming that all participants desire or benefit from activist-oriented research approaches (Sweetman *et al*, 2010). In a Pre-1965 *legit* MT training, not all students may seek broader structural change; some may simply want effective, technically informed help.

Overarching Methodological approach

Reflecting on my positionality and the paradigms available to me, a mixed-methods design appears most suitable. As a practitioner-researcher, combining qualitative and quantitative data can offer a fuller picture of students' vocal development. Qualitative tools such as surveys and reflective journals capture learners' experiences and perceptions (Kelly, 2023), while quantitative measures allow patterns and changes in technical outcomes to be tracked over time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using both approaches may enable the research to address individual needs ethically and support safe, effective teaching practice (Jonathan & Mbogo, 2016).

A pragmatic stance strengthens this design, as it prioritises problem-solving and aligns with the reflective nature of my everyday vocal coaching (Brookfield, 2017; Allemang *et al,* 2022). Quantitative data might document developments such as vocal range or repertoire growth, while qualitative accounts could provide insight into how students navigate technical challenges in pre-1965 MT repertoire. Together, these methods could balance measurable outcomes with lived experience, ensuring the research remains both technically grounded and pedagogically relevant.

Action Research

Action Research involves systematic, practitioner-led inquiry carried out through cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, with the explicit aim of improving professional practice as explored in detail by Cohen *et al* (2017). Action Research is widely used in educational research because it supports situated, practice-embedded inquiry, values the expertise and reflective capacity of the practitioner and can also enhance collaborative knowledge-building with learners (Alton-Lee, 2005) Its cyclical structure enables continuous refinement of teaching approaches as emerging data directly informs subsequent actions, making it well suited to skill-based disciplines such as singing (Burwell, and Shipton, 2013). It is useful to draw on action research studies that relate directly to my field, such as those by Baumfield *et al.* (2012), which can demonstrate how quantitative measures like changes in vocal range or agility can be integrated with qualitative insights from learner reflections, observations and vocal journals. The dual role of practitioner-researcher introduces potential bias, particularly when interpreting student progress or evaluating the effectiveness of one's own interventions. Herr and Anderson (2014) emphasise that such challenges are an inherent aspect of the Action Research process. These limitations of Action Research must be recognised as it can have a strong focus on a specific context which could result that findings may not easily apply beyond the particular institution or group being studied (Mackenzie *et al*, 2012). This design is particularly suitable for my work as it allows for an investigation into how *Bel Canto* derived technical exercises as Berg (2011) provides research into, can develop a healthy pre-1965 legit MT sound. A comparable project can be seen in Welch *et al,* (2005) project where researchers used Action Research whereby the research adopted a multidisciplinary approach, integrating voice science, acoustics and singing psychology. By utilising action research it can open a pathway toward meaningful change by actively addressing the challenges identified (Winter, 2020). However, numerical analysis alone may not provide the practical strategies needed to support students effectively.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a research design focused on understanding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Finlay, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Widely known in education research it can highlight learners' subjective perspectives and provides context-specific insights (Burns et al, 2022). Advantages of this approach may include generating detailed understanding and informing practical teaching interventions (Alase, 2017). However, its limitations include reliance on small, specific participant groups, which may limit broader generalisation and the potential for researcher interpretation to introduce bias (Dukes, 1984).

In the context of my work, phenomenology could be particularly valuable for examining students' personal experiences when engaging with Pre-1965 MT repertoire (Neubauer, 2019). Phenomenology could complement action research in my practice, as both approaches may allow for the practical application of teaching strategies.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach that pursues behaviours, practices, and experiences within their natural settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It is frequently used in education research because it allows researchers to examine how classroom culture, teacher practices, and peer interactions shape learning outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An ethnographic design could provide a suitable framework for investigating the cultural and social dimensions of my teaching context which could support a deeper understanding of how learning unfolds not just technically but socially and culturally, within the training environment (Hodkinson, *et al* 2008). Through an ethnographic viewpoint, as the practitioner researcher, it can give insight into how students absorb, negotiate and sometimes resist the cultural, technical expectations embedded within the work place environment. The benefits of an ethnographic approach could result in gaining contextually grounded insights into students' experiences and revealing how cultural and institutional norms influence engagement (Blomberg & Burrel, 2009). This design is particularly appropriate for my work because it would allow me to examine how *Bel Canto* and Western Classical techniques are received and enacted by students in a vocational MT environment. For instance, teaching in the UAE introduces particular considerations: students' comfort with projecting or exploring expressive performance may vary depending on cultural norms (Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2011), while differences in dialect and ethnicity can influence vowel shaping, resonance placement, and sustained vowel production (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015). However, limitations include the significant time and immersion required, potential researcher bias due to close involvement with participants, and challenges in generalising findings beyond the specific context studied (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Research methods

Interviews can support phenomenological inquiry by offering access to participants' lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They can be conducted one-to-one or online, improving accessibility and participant comfort (Opdenakker, 2006; Irvine, 2011). However, they require careful question design, as leading or overly structured prompts can influence responses and reduce the credibility of the data (Cohen et al., 2018; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Observations are widely used in ethnographic research because they can allow the researcher to examine behaviour and interaction as they naturally unfold (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In vocal pedagogy, observational work by Welch *et al.* (2005) demonstrated how this method could capture students' responses to teacher modelling, their uptake of technical instructions, and the influence of the studio environment on engagement. This is particularly relevant in the UAE, where cultural expectations around projection, expressiveness, and vocal presence may shape how students participate in lessons and approach legit MT techniques. Observations must also be approached reflexively, as the researcher's presence and interpretations could introduce bias that needs to be carefully mitigated.

Surveys can offer a way of collecting information from a broader group of participants and can be incorporated into qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs (Cohen et al., 2017). Surveys could help identify trends such as changes in vocal confidence or technical progress. This method is also useful for tracking developments across action research cycles, enabling the researcher to monitor how particular interventions may support students' learning and technical growth, as demonstrated in similar educational studies (Berends, 2012).

Ethical Consideration and Insider Research

Ethical considerations are central to this study because it takes place within my own vocal studio and involves post-16 learners which is an environment where power dynamics and expectation may be apparent (Mitra, 2008; Haldane, 2018). Working as a practitioner-researcher requires sustained awareness of these dynamics to ensure that all practices reflect openness and ethical responsibility (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007).

A concern that may arise is the possibility that students may feel pressured to participate due to my teaching role. This risk can be mitigated by making participation explicitly voluntary and by reinforcing that choosing not to take part or choosing to withdraw will have no impact on assessment, feedback or training (Vanclay *et al,* 2013). It is also important to differentiate between consent and informed consent; informed consent requires that participants fully understand the aims of the project, the methods involved, and how their data will be handled before agreeing to take part (Patton *et al*, 2015; Sell, 2017).

As Aguinis and Solarino (2019) note, transparency is fundamental in insider research, and following Cronin's (2018) guidance it is essential to clearly explain to participants how observational notes, reflections and feedback will be used, as well as the steps taken to protect confidentiality and reduce potential researcher bias. The broader ethical guidance offered by the Belmont principles (Friesen *et al*, 2017; Nagai et al, 2022), which emphasise respect for persons, beneficence and justice, can provide an additional structure for responsible decision-making. Nolen and Putten's (2007) principles could help ensure that insider research prioritises participant welfare, promotes fairness, and protects learners' rights and dignity within educational settings.

Conclusion

This paper has been a catalyst in understanding methodological approaches suited to investigating practice within vocational MT vocal training. A combination of pragmatic and transformative paradigms within an Action Research design appears appropriate, as this allows for the examination of both technical vocal progression and students' lived experiences through flexible, mixed-method approaches. As an insider researcher, it is also important to adopt a framework that supports intersubjective interaction, enabling researcher and participants to co-construct understanding.

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