BMPF 7005 – Undertaking Research in Workplaces

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

Introduction

As a novice practitioner researcher it is essential to gain an understanding of a range of different methodological approaches, research designs and research methods in order to eliminate any confusion brought about by continuous “debate and contradictory information” (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 1).

To overcome this issue, I have now studied a large amount of literature on the matter and am now in a position to outline a specific pathway that I believe will be the most appropriate process to conduct my future insider research to discover new information which will be used to improve my voice pedagogy practise (Costley, 2006, p. 1).

This essay will focus on the paradigms of positivism, constructivism/interpretivism and pragmatism, the methodological approaches of ethnography, hermeneutics and phenomenology and the methods of sampling, interviews, observations and field notes.

My approach has been guided not only by my own human knowledge as a singing teacher and performer with numerous years of experience but also my personal philosophical viewpoint (Creswell, 2014, p. 31; Hoey, 2014, p. 3). I seek to go beyond what Dewey describes as *'habit'* (1922/2008 cited in Morgan, 2014, p. 1046), where the skills I have gained can endure a situation in question and look towards *'inquiry'* to bring about attentive reflection. It could be argued that Dewey's five step approach to inquiry is a straightforward way to assess the initial thought process of beliefs in order to decide on further actions:

1. Recognising a situation as problematic;
2. Considering the difference it makes to define the problem one way rather than another;
3. Developing a possible line of action as a response to the problem;
4. Evaluating potential actions in terms of their likely consequences;
5. Taking actions that are felt to be likely to address the problematic situation.

(Morgan, 2014, p. 1047)

By further reflecting on Dewey's questions “What are the sources of our beliefs? And, what are the meanings of our actions?” (p. 1046) it is possible to begin the personal journey of inquiry.

Ontology/Epistemology

I will begin by establishing an ontological and epistemological position. Ontology poses the question of how the “nature of reality” (Laverty, 2003, p. 26; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) appears to the researcher. What is their belief system? How do they perceive reality? Is there one or multiple realities? Epistemology then considers the researchers ontological viewpoint to discover the connection between their reality and what they wish to learn (Laverty, 2003, p. 26).

My ontological and epistemological position has been guided by reflecting on my own background in vocal pedagogy and performance alongside personal life experience (Hoey, 2014, p. 3). Prior to a professional career, throughout my early years of training I was taught under a system of using imagery as a method to understanding how to use the voice and having experienced more than one tutor it was clear upon reflection that some ideas were subjective (Callaghan, 2014, p. ix). In recent years, since the use of voice science has become an increasingly used way of educating singers (2014, p. 8), I was guided by tutors who spoke heavily about voice science and therefore it could be argued that “it is now possible to take a more objective approach to the singing voice and how it works” (p. ix). It is due to the guidance I have received over the years, that I now use a mix of imagery and voice science in my own teaching career. How then, will this influence my practitioner research approach? I would argue that my own perspective of reality is not entirely subjective as the understanding I have gained from voice science has often confirmed the views of my early opinionated mentors (Callaghan, 2014, pp. 7-8) therefore, imposing an objective aspect to the process of understanding. This will impact on my preferred choice of paradigm to assist my research.

Paradigms

Creswell refers to paradigms as “worldviews” (Creswell, 2014, p. 35) which corresponds with the researchers philosophical viewpoint of the world which will guide the nature of their study. Paradigms can be also be known as a theoretical framework (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 2) or “a set of basic beliefs” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Although they are not always mentioned within research text itself (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 2), it is the choice of paradigm which solidifies the initial foundation on which to build

consequent methodologies and methods (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 7; Creswell, 2014, p. 35).

With the rise of qualitative methods of data collection, new paradigms have been introduced to accommodate a preferred method of research (Feilzer, 2010, p. 6; Morgan, 2007, p. 54, Creswell, 2014, p. 32) However, “there is no way to elevate one over another on the basis of ultimate, foundational criteria” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). How then, do we establish the most appropriate paradigm for our personal research? The researcher must choose the most relevant paradigm for their desired area of study (Morgan, 2007, p. 54).

Positivism/Postpositivism

Referred to as “the scientific method,” (Creswell, 2006, p. 36) positivist frameworks are used by the researcher taking an objective stance, viewing reality as a certainty to be obtained, disassociated with oneself and free from bias (Laverty, 2003, p. 26).

Positivism has been the dominating paradigm in physical and social sciences for over 400 years (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) and following the second world war post-positivism took its place (Mertens, 2005 cited in Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, I feel it must be referred to in this essay for comparability purposes, however, it does not suit my personal research for the following reasons. If I were approaching my research from an objective standpoint, seeking only what is “out there” (Creswell, 2014, p. 36) I would be abandoning my belief that there is more than one reality to be discovered. Although I believe that there is a truth to be learned through voice science research, my personal inquiries will be unable to divulge into this area due to limited resources and so I will seek to cover a qualitative method of inquiry rather than the quantitative data collection methods that this paradigm uses (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 3). Qualitative research uses an inductive style of enquiry, building hypotheses from gathering data. As a consequence, the researcher will use words rather than numbers to examine the intricacy of outcomes to further understand meaning whereas quantitative research will use a deductive style of enquiry to result in an objective conclusion (Creswell, 2014, p. 32). Therefore, qualitative methods are used where quantification methods can not be used to produce findings (Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni, 2017, p. 572;. Hopefl, 1997, p. 48).

Constructivism/Interpretivism

In contrast to the “disinterested scientist” of positivism (Laverty, 2003, p. 26), in constructivism the researcher becomes the “passionate participant” (Guba and Lincoln,

1994, p. 115) and having dedicated a lifetime of learning to the field of voice already, this description resonates with my ardent interest in the subject. Constructionist and interprevtivist paradigms are commonly used in social sciences. Interpretivism, seeking how humans understand the world and constructivism, exploring how reality is composed through those connections (Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni, 2017, p. 573). In opposition to positivism, qualitative methods of collecting data would be used by the researcher (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p.3; Creswell, 2006, p. 37). Qualitative data collection suits my need to find an understanding from intricate research involving the thoughts of various participants (Creswell, 2014, p. 32). It is also essential that both the researcher and the participants views are taken into account when considering the concluding data (Creswell, 2014, p. 37; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 113).

Pragmatism

It could be argued as Mackenzie and Knipe suggest that titles such 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' suggest “a purity of method, which is potentially impossible in social research” (2005, p. 7). However, what if we could combine the two? (Morgan, 2007, p. 71)

This is where “pragmatism brushes aside the quantitative/qualitative divide and ends the paradigm war” (Feilzer, 2010, p. 14). This could prove extremely useful if I want to use a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014, p. 39; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 5; Feilzer, 2010, p. 6).

Therefore, rather than being constricted to one method and eliminating any suggestions of others (Feilzer, 2010, p. 6), pragmatism may be the paradigm I would be most inclined to work with if I am considering studying a topic within voice science.

Methodological Approaches

Ethnography

Ethnography dates back over one hundred years and emerged from anthropological work and is now rising in popularity amongst researchers (Hoey, 2014, p. 1). It should be recognised as a reciprocal methodological approach which has developed through the connection of the researcher and their participants (p. 3). Understanding that myself as a researcher will also be a participant whilst continuing to monitor the study, an element of ““detachment” (p. 2) must be apparent. I will be able to hold an “emic” perspective observing the viewpoint as an “insider” as opposed to an “etic” perspective where I would be observing from a distance (p. 2). Ethnography suits my status as principal of my music

academy as I have already spent much time in the environment and alongside the participants I intend to use for research (p. 2), however I must be careful that I recognise my familiarity within the environment and to be aware that I may miss vital evidence because of this (p. 4). Using this methodology, interviews and participant observations would be at the forefront of data collection and I will discuss these methods in further details further on in the essay.

Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Phenomenology can be described as “studying the essence” (Kakkori, 2009, p. 19) whereas hermeneutics focuses on “language and interpretation” (p. 20).
Phenomenology was created by Edmund Husserl whose interest in philosophy changed his focus which had previously been mathematics. He believed that researchers should seek to understand more than the “external, physical stimuli” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22) and instead look towards context to find truth. His student Heidegger developed Hursserl's approach bringing context to be a central concern (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007, p. 174) in hermeneutic phenomenology. Both phenomenology and hermeneutics focus on “human lived experiences” (p. 175).
Hermeneutic knowledge is based on the understanding we share with others, the “*fusion of horizons*” (Paterson and Higgs, 2005, p. 343) through the language of dialogue and text. The *“hermeneutic circle”* (p. 345) is a recognised system within the methodology whereby the researcher continually repeats the research process until they gain a comprehensive understanding of the study (Paterson and Higgs, 2005, p. 343; Laverty, 2003, p. 24). This questioning form of inquiry *“question and answer”* (Paterson and Higgs, 2005, p. 346) is the essence of hermeneutics helping the researcher to reach new levels of understanding (Paterson and Higgs, 2005, p. 346; Laverty, 2003, pp. 24-25).

Methods

Sampling

Qualitative research allows for a small sample size and is keeping with its nature (Denscombe, 2003, p. 24). My music academy is a small business, therefore, I need to consider if research samples within the academy will be enough to discover new information and if not, figure out how to find samples outside of my immediate range of accessibility.

Convenience Sampling

Due to the nature of the subjects within voice pedagogy that I would like to research initially, such as peer learning, it seems appropriate to use a convenience sample to examine this in the classroom environment. This sample will consist of a number of students who attend voice lessons on a regular basis with myself as their tutor. Denscombe suggests that convenience sampling is a “lazy approach” to research (2003, p. 17). However, due to being a novice practitioner researcher I am limited to resources and have assessed that this would be the most appropriate way of gathering data at this initial point of inquiry (Berg, 2001, p. 32). I am of the understanding that this may not “equate with good research” (Denscombe, 2003, p. 17), yet I hope to achieve results that are a good starting point to guide further research using a broader range of samples.

Snowball Sampling

Due to the size of my music academy, my sample sizes are going to be relatively low in number. Therefore, I could consider the use of snowball sampling, beginning with just one participant and allowing the development of snowballing to increase my sample size (Denscombe, 2003, p. 16). This could be done by asking participants to circulate the information to their personal network, or by using social media which has a larger reach to “ locate subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in a study” (Berg, 2001, p. 33).

Interviews

Interviews are a good way to collect “targeted data” (Hoey, 2014, p. 2). There are a variety of different interview strategies to choose from including face to face and email interviews, furthermore the researcher must decide if they will ask their questions in an structured, semi structured or unstructured manner.

In an email interview, the interviewee does not have to answer immediately, this giving them a longer period to decide on what answer they would like to give (Opdenaker, 2006, p. 3). This may serve as an advantage in that they will give a more informed answer rather than on the spot, where they may miss out relevant information. However, with face to face interviews you also receive “social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language” which can add further information (p. 3).

Out the three interview types, I would most likely choose to use a semi-structured interview method for the following reasons. Structured interviews with limit the information I receive and not allow for a deeper understanding (Gil et al, 2008, p. 291). On the contrary,

unstructured interviews may give a comprehensive account of information yet it would be very time consuming to examine this data (p. 291) and there is also a risk of “data saturation” (Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni, 2017, p. 572) where the data stops providing further information. Therefore, to avoid being overwhelmed by the content of data I collect, I am inclined to choose a semi-structured interview system whereby if I believe I can gain further information of relevance, the participant can then expand on their answer at the researchers request (Gil et al. 2008, p. 291).

Interviewing Children

There is then the subject of interviewing children, whose participation is likely to dominate my research as my client base is mainly aged 18 and under. The research I am considering is based around small student groups. Group interviewing may seem a useful way to gather information from the students (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, pp. 373-375) however, there are a number of factors to consider that could hinder my results given the age category that the participants fall into.

It could be argued that interviewing the children as a group could be “less intimidating” (p. 374) than on their own, however, I would then have to ensure they do not feel vulnerable and hesitant to answer with their friends present (p. 375). I also have to consider the teacher/relationship; it advised that having the researcher as an authoritative figure may persuade the interviewee to only say “what they think the researcher wants to hear” (p. 375) so as to gratify their mentor.

Furthermore, I have to consider which age groups to concentrate my research on so as to take into account their “incognitive and linguistic development, attention and concentration span, ability to recall, life experiences, what they consider to be important, status and power” (Arksey and Knight, 1999:116 cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 374). I will have to carefully prepare the interviews in a suitable way for the relevant age group to understand and to keep them relaxed.

Focus Groups

Focus groups may prove useful to provide a shared view amongst students (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 376). I believe that within my groups that I intend to study, this method could be positive in that it will encourage those individuals who are nervous to speak up, to be encouraged by the words of their peers with whom they are comfortable with as they have been part of that group for at least six months and for some several years (Gil et al. 2008, p. 293). However, my groups are small (maximum of six) so there is

also a risk of limited feedback especially if some participants feel afraid to share a different point of view (p. 293). I hope to attempt this style of data collection, yet understand that I may need to dismiss it if it proves unreliable for reasons stated above.

Participant Observation

The type of observation that will suit my current circumstances is as a participant observer where I will be teaching the group of participants in the study. I need to be aware that within this setting, I too am a participant and find a suitable way to take field notes whilst being aware of potential bias as I will be "familiar with the participants personalities which which cause me to omit certain behaviours that a non-participant observer would clearly notice (Bell and Waters, 2018, p. 247). This will take place over a period of weeks/months rather than a stand alone session to create better conclusions (p. 248).

Recorded Field Notes

One of my personal targets for the teaching year ahead is to make a teaching journal; this is similar to the idea of recording field notes. At present, unless I am witnessing a performance of which I am to give immediate feedback, in which case I will be taking notes, the overall lesson observation notes are taken after the student has finished their class and has left the venue or finished the online call. I would like to have the advantage of not teaching the class and observing as a non participant observer, however, this is not how I intend to carry out my first project as to "take field notes while engaging in the action as a participant, to state the obvious, would be (a) to disrupt the naturalness of the setting and (b) to disclose the researcher's role as observer." (Denscombe, 2003, p. 204). The disadvantage to taking notes after class is only recalling what you can remember in the session known as "selective recall" followed by only remembering what I perceive to be important, "selective perception" (p. 193).

Insider Research

As an insider researcher, I will be able to compose a study based within my own workplace allowing me "possibilities for autonomy and empowerment" (Costley, 2006, p. 1). This position will allow me to "make challenges to the status quo from an informed perspective" (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, I will already have a thorough understanding of the topic of my research and I will be able to relate to my participants (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016, pp. 849 - 851).

Previous studies of insider research have revealed uncertain conclusions, indicating that

there is a sense of subjectivity, therefore it is important to be aware of this potential bias (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016, p. 849). It is also essential that the insider researcher does not exclude potentially important information by overlooking what might not seem meaningful to them but to an outsider would be a critical piece of information (Saidin and Yaacob, 2016, p. 850; Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 6) .

Ethics

After reading Berg's history of ethics (Berg, 2001, pp. 40-44), it could be argued that as my research will not be as physically invasive as the abhorrent studies that brought about regulating research in the mid 20th century, then perhaps I do not have too much to consider? However, although my research may be distinctly different in subject, in social science Berg states that "ethical considerations are subjective" (p. 39). Therefore I must take into account what others advise could be an ethical issue but not discount the idea immediately and carefully balance "the amount of access to subjects the researchers are willing to accept in exchange for the amount of ethical risk they are willing to take" (p. 40). Even if researchers can protect subjects from harm during the course of their research, they must also consider what happens thereafter as a direct result of the research (p. 62). Answering the following questions will serve as a starting point to my considerations:

1. What are some of the important ethical concerns to consider regarding this proposed research project?
2. If you were the researcher, how might you justify conducting a covert project of this sort?
3. How might a project be proposed that would likely provide similar information but would not require covert entry?
4. What safeguards should the researcher take to protect the subjects in the proposed project?

(pp. 62-63)

Within my carefully prepared research design, I will consider each "research problem vs ethical dilemma" (p. 61). For example:

Problem: Do voice students gain progress and gain confidence through peer assessment?

Dilemma: Peers may give false feedback to please other participants, thus giving false confidence to the performing student, which could result in the student not progressing adequately. This could sabotage the research. However, with myself as both the tutor and

researcher present in the room, I would be able to recognise when this is happening. Another issue I may find is who volunteers for the study.

If the topic of my study is “confidence” and yet it is only the confident students who have chosen to participate, the results would mean very little and there “would be no way of determining if these types of persons were similar to others who lacked this eagerness to volunteer. In other words, both qualitative and aggregated statistical data would become questionable” (p. 53). Additionally, students may feel a loyalty to their teacher, not wanting to let them down for fear it may impact on their progress and results. Therefore they volunteer to take part, however, this could be identified as being “coerced or manipulated into volunteering” (p. 53). This leads to the understanding of “informed consent” (pp. 56-57) where the volunteer is fully aware that participation is their choice entirely and furthermore, due to the age of the students I must seek full consent from their parental guardian. I would then look to gain “active consent” in writing from their parents in the form of a signed reply slip rather than “passive consent” where it is assumed they can take part if the researcher does not receive a reply after informing the parents about the study to be carried out (p. 50).

There becomes a question of what happens if not everyone in the class wants to be part of the research, am I allowed to conduct my research within that class if the whole class has not agreed? It is easier to exclude a child from quantitative research then qualitative where I will be assessing though observation (p. 51). I must also be aware of confidentiality (attempting to not disclose information about the individual participants through thoughtless conversation) and anonymity (remaining nameless) in order to protect my students (pp. 57-59).

Overall my research should ensure that “(a) any use of the material should ensure that no one suffers as a result, and (b) any use of the material should avoid disclosing the identities of those involved” (Denscombe, 2003, p. 204).

Validity

The vital component of all research is validity and reliability. In the case of the qualitative research which will be my approach to my initial study, conscientious diligence of these two factors must be given due consideration as one of the main concerns of qualitative research is subjectivity which can easily be scrutinised by scientists (Brink, 1993, p. 35)

In the hope that one day I have the resources to study a topic within voice science which will steer towards using a quantitative data collection approach and allowing an objective standpoint, I must consider, internal and external validity. Within quantitative data, internal

validity ensures that that “study measures what it claims it is measuring” and external validity shows “ the extent the results can be generalised” (Shenton, 2004 cited in Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni, 2017, p. 574). However, both have been applied to qualitative research (Denzin, 1970 cited in Brink, 1993, p. 35), the difference being that the findings of internal validity in qualitative research reflect reality in an authentic manner and external validity shows how those findings work amongst other groups (Brink 1993, p. 35).

Conclusion

Although, there is a large quantity of information about research studies that has not been covered in this essay, I have now established a starting point from which to begin my initial study. I have gathered the knowledge that will assist my data collection and understand that there are many different approaches to research that I can explore should the topic of my studies change as I gain confidence as a research practitioner.

After reviewing the many different research possibilities, I have concluded that for my initial study I intend to use the paradigm of constructivism/interpretivism, the methodological approaches of ethnography, hermeneutic phenomenology and the methods of sampling, interviews, observations and field notes whilst taking into account the concluding validity and ensuring to follow careful ethical procedures.

One of the main issues that I intend to be aware of throughout my study is bias. The paradigm, methodological approach and methods I have chosen will be subjective in nature and therefore this could potentially have an impact on the results of my research.

The next stage of my research practitioner development is to formulate a specific study that will suit my place of work, expand my knowledge and adhere to ethical procedures and I now have a variety of ways to approach this which has given me the confidence to begin the next stage of my study.

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Catherine Whitehall

Student ID: 1921123

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