

“It’s made me... a better human:”
the role of private singing instruction
in the lives of adult amateur singers

Context

Vocal pedagogy literature focuses on children or professional singers

Amateurs mainly considered in community music settings (amateur choirs)

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Lack of information on amateur singers in the private studio

Amateurs mainly considered in community music settings (amateur choirs)

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Research question:

What role does private voice instruction play in the lives of adult amateur singers?

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“To see music in an integrated context... is to recognize it and the larger meanings it has in the lives of the music-makers.” (Hibbard, 2017, p. 185)

Methodology

Focused ethnography

“Learn *about* people by learning *from* them”
(Roper and Shapira, 2000, p. ix)

- Participant observation
- Interviews
- Document evaluation

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Examine a small subset of a culture for a limited amount of time to answer a specific research question

Methodology

Data Collection

- Participant observation
 - Record three voice lessons
- Interviews
 - Semi-structured interview
- Document evaluation
 - None evaluated

Methodology

Participant information

	Kris	Paige	Carly	Theresa	Laura	Sally
Pronouns	he/him	she/her	she/her	she/her	she/her	she/her
Age bracket	35-39	40-44	50-54	60-64	65-69	70-74
Average number of voice lessons per month	2	3	4	3	4	2
Length of formal vocal training	Less than one year	Between one and two years	Between five and six years	Between five and six years	Less than one year	More than 10 years
Location	Washington	Washington	Washington	Washington	Maryland	Washington
Day job	Software developer	Actor and life coach	Writer and editor	Federal government employee	Retired	Retired

Methodology

Data analysis

- Descriptive phase
 - First cycle coding: descriptive, subcoding, and in vivo coding
- Contextual analysis
 - Second cycle coding: pattern coding
- Development of themes and “theoretical formulations”
(da Silva Barreto, Marcan, and Garcia-Vivar, 2017, p. 636)

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations

- Mitigate risk of power differential (Aburn, Gott, and Hoare, 2021)
 - Submitted interview questions for approval
 - Muted myself during interviews
 - Sent participants copies of the transcripts and final report
 - Informed teachers that they were not being evaluated

Methodology

Aims and objectives	Personal learning outcomes
Conduct a literature review that examines how amateurs and adult learners (in music and in other subjects) are currently discussed in the literature	To learn to conduct a literature review and a qualitative focused ethnographic study
Explore the experiences of adult amateur singers	To learn to analyze significant amounts of data
Synthesize data so that voice teachers may better understand their adult amateur students' perspectives and reflexively adjust studio practices	To learn to synthesize data and describe implications for the field and recommendations for further research
	To be able to utilize the findings to better serve my students

The role of singing lessons

The role of singing lessons

Participant	Larger goal	Quote
Kris	Improve his singing skill	[My goal is] to improve my own instrument and learn how to use it better.
Paige	Become a successful actor	Am I going to go out for musical theatre? No. Am I going to go out for a play that has music in it? Ideally, yes.... I don't want singing to be the hindrance to why I'm not on stage.
Carly	Challenge herself to try new things	I've... decided in my adult life that I'm going to do more things I'm not good at, or at least not inherently good at, and I'm going to be cool with that.
Laura	Overcome a fear	I'm doing something that I was afraid to do.... Every time you can... just do that, it is a good thing.
Theresa	Be a visible representation of her identity	I bring something that's unique to that area.... That would be the reason that I [perform].
Sally	Stay healthy	I do it because I want to stay healthy... in my mind as well as my body.

The role of singing lessons: an act of meaning-making

“the process by which a person derives meaning(s) from an activity to find a purpose of life and make sense of [their] life”

(Iwasaki, Messina, and Hopper, 2018, p. 29)

Findings

The journey to singing lessons

Inside the lesson

Outside the lesson

The journey to singing lessons

Motivations

- Learn a new, challenging skill
- Feel more comfortable when singing
- Representation

The journey to singing lessons

Choosing private lessons

- Desire for personal attention
- Regular lesson schedule helps prioritization

The journey to singing lessons

Starting lessons

- Aging affected participants' attitudes toward singing
- Students may seek out teachers by personal connection or recommendation

Inside the lesson

Results of lessons

- Improvement in technique and understanding
- Greater confidence and pride in their work
- Heightened awareness of body
- Awareness and improvement of vocal health and hygiene
- Continued anxiety and resilience
- Shift in singer identity

Inside the lesson

The role of the teacher

- Acceptance and “unconditional” support
- Lessons described as “therapeutic”
- Informal socialization

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“It’s not 100% just, ‘I’m hiring you to help me sing.’” (Sally)

Outside the lesson

Practice and preparation

- Participants use notes from the lesson, recordings of their repertoire, and playlists of songs they enjoy singing
- Practice is “casual” and affected/limited by their schedule

Outside the lesson

Lessons affecting outside life

- Greater appreciation for professional singers and a more nuanced way of listening to music
- Greater empathy and connection with others
- More comfortable doing difficult things
- Want others to take singing lessons

Outside the lesson

Outside life affecting lessons

- Outside activities affect the voice during the lesson
- Lessons are impacted by current events

Outside the lesson

Facilitators and constraints

- Facilitators: supportive spouses
- Constraints: limited time, finances

Outside the lesson

Other hobbies

- Participants engaged in a variety of other hobbies
- Singing lessons seemed to be taken more seriously than other hobbies

Practical applications

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Sociocultural factors

- The expectation of “what a singer is” (Paige)

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Sociocultural factors

- The expectation of “what a singer is” (Paige)
- Application: hedonistic singing
 - Emphasis on singing for pleasure
 - Allow lesson time for informal socialization that creates a welcoming environment
 - Participatory music making (Turino, 2008; Bernard and Cayari, 2020)

Practical applications

Financial factors

- Voice teachers must charge what is “appropriate” for their location and experience (Borm-Krüger, 2016)
- Many students are unable to afford quality private instruction

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- Many are unable to afford quality private instruction
- Application: need for a more equitable and accessible system for private lessons
 - “It seems wrong that enhancement of well-being arising from voice lessons be confined to a privileged demographic.”
(Smith, Kleinerman, and Cohen, 2022, p. 928)

Practical applications

Political factors

- Influence of outside stressors on day-to-day life
 - e.g., parenthood (Smith, Kleinerman, and Cohen, 2022)

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- Influence of outside stressors on day-to-day life
 - e.g., parenthood (Smith, Kleinerman, and Cohen, 2022)
- Application: studio policies that acknowledge influence of outside life
 - Flexible cancellation policies and payment plans
 - Individualized expectations of practice

Conclusion

Successes

- Began to fill a gap in the literature
- Fulfilled learning objectives by conducting ethnographic research study

Limitations

- Low number of participants
- Five of six participants were my own students
- Online vs. in-person lessons

Conclusion

Recommendation
Research how knowledge of vocal health and hygiene affects the habits and practices of amateur singers
Changing singer identity in adults and how it could influence the learning experience
What qualities singing students look for in a teacher
Connection between playing another instrument and singing
Correlation between value ascribed to singing lessons and time spent practicing
How adults use singing as an act of meaning-making
How meaning-making can affect the learning experience

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