

Sight Singing and the Musical Theatre Performer

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Background to Research

- Musical theatre performers are rarely competent sight readers - relying on learning by rote/notebashes - highly ineffective **(Contanza and Russell, 1992)**.
- Vocational musical theatre performance colleges struggle to allow time and resources to effectively teach sight singing **(Blustein et al., 2021)**.
- Musical theatre students often come into their training with little or no musical background **(Bell and Chicurel, 2008)** - current pedagogical approach doesn't appear to cater to these needs **(Franchescina, 2015)**
- More has to be done to help MT performers understand the music their learning **(Brown, 2003)** to help them be self-sufficient in their professional life **(Patty, 1997)**.



Who Am I? - Professional Musical Director and Singing Teacher (10 years experience)



Aims and Objectives

- To gain insight into coverage of sight singing across vocational musical theatre training programmes.
- To use **visual aid** and **somatic** work to develop a sight singing teaching model targeted at musical theatre undergraduate students.
- To use the data from this research project to inform future pedagogical practice in the teaching of sight singing (individually and in class settings).



METHODS

Constructivist paradigm - change will be "differently experienced by individuals" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

1. **TRIANGULATION** - ensured validity of qualitative study using method triangulation (Polit and Beck, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

ONLINE FOCUS GROUP



Methods

2. PRACTICE LED RESEARCH

- Combine roles of scholar and practitioner (Pedgley, 2007) to provide rich context data (Evans, 2010).
- Insider researcher - as a musical director that also teaches in the drama school network, I am an insider researcher.
- Important to acknowledge my 'social situatedness' as a tutor within the drama school system (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- **MODULE 2 REFERENCE**



Methods

2. PRACTICE LED RESEARCH

- Ethical considerations

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION	ACTION
Selection bias in the questionnaire (Ellenberg, 1994).	Questionnaire was made available across a wide range of online platform, forums and drama schools.
Bias as students seek to please or impress (Delgado-Rodriguez, 2004).	Questionnaire was anonymised and I stayed in the background as much as possible during focus group discussion.
Personal bias - validity is affected by researcher's perception of validity in the study and choice of paradigm (Miller, 2000).	Detailed reflection, close awareness of personal biases and a commitment to represent the participants accurately (Dwyer and Buckle, 2004) and detailed final reflection (Scrivener, 2010).

Questionnaire

- Drafted, pretested and adjusted to ensure clarity (Grover and Vriens, 2009).
- Likert scale to ensure clear answers (Yusof et al., 2019) and low dropout rate (Knapp and Heidingsfelder, 2001).
- Coding was also easier (Ursa et al., 2003) - comment boxes allowed for freer expression of views without interference (Foddy, 1993).
- Open ended questions had a small comment box to avoid invalid entries (Couper, 2001; Kwak and Radler, 1999) and keep answers succinct and valid.



Focus Group

- Focus group - group discussion on given topic, organised for research and guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1998).
- Interviews vs. Focus Groups
 - Interviews - great for learning in-depth perceptions, experiences and motivations of an individual (Gill and Bailie, 2018)
 - Focus groups - facilitates dynamic discussion (Berg, 2001) and allows views to be comfortably challenged (Gill et al., 2008).



Findings - Questionnaire

- Made available online for a **7 week** period at the start of the project.
- 34 participants answered the questionnaire:
 - 12 were current drama school students
 - 5 graduated no more than 5 years ago
 - 7 graduated more than 5 years ago
- 12 cited MA/PGDip as their highest qualification

Sight Singing and Musical Theatre Performance Training

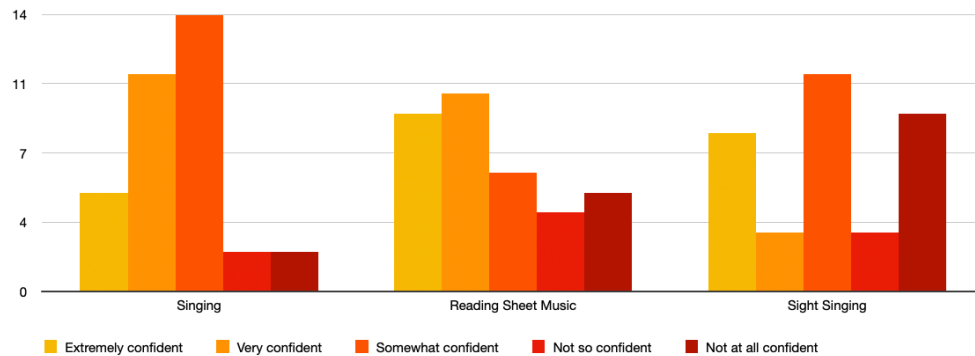
* 1. What is your drama school background?

- ☐ I am a current drama school student.
- ☐ I graduated drama school within the last 5 years.
- ☐ I graduated drama school more than 5 years ago.

* 2. What is your highest level of musical theatre qualification?

- ☐ MA/PGDip in Musical Theatre
- ☐ BA (Hons)/Level 6 Professional Diploma in Musical Theatre
- ☐ HND in Musical Theatre
- ☐ Level 4 in Musical Theatre (BTEC, CertHE, Extended Diploma)
- ☐ Level 3 in Musical Theatre (BTEC)
- ☐ Other (e.g. LCM, Trinity, ABRSM or similar diploma/graded examinations)

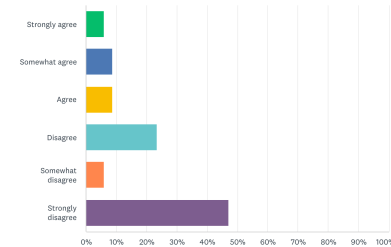
3. If "Other", please specify



Comparing Singing Confidence and Music Literacy

Sight reading was taught in a class setting as part of my training.

Answered: 34 Skipped: 0



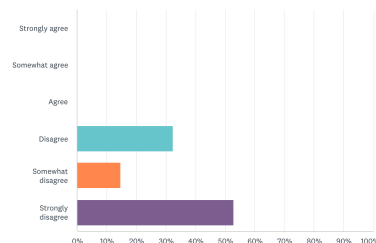
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	2
Somewhat agree	3
Agree	3
Disagree	8
Somewhat disagree	2
Strongly disagree	16
TOTAL	34

8 of 34 participants agreed with the statement

26 of 34 participants disagreed with the statement (16 strongly)

Sight reading was taught on a 1-to-1 basis (e.g. by repertoire coaches or singing teachers).

Answered: 34 Skipped: 0



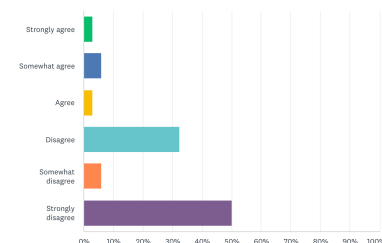
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	0.00%	0
Somewhat agree	0.00%	0
Agree	0.00%	0
Disagree	32.35%	11
Somewhat disagree	14.71%	5
Strongly disagree	52.94%	18
TOTAL		34

0 of 34 participants agreed with the statement

34 of 34 participants disagreed with the statement (18 strongly)

The sight reading training provided as part of my training has equipped me to sight read solo vocal lines with confidence.

Answered: 34 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	2.94%	1
Somewhat agree	5.88%	2
Agree	2.94%	1
Disagree	32.35%	11
Somewhat disagree	5.88%	2
Strongly disagree	50.00%	17
TOTAL		34

4 of 34 participants agreed with the statement

30 of 34 participants disagreed with the statement (17 strongly)

Not covered at all - sight singing was not addressed or mentioned in any capacity as part of training.

Lack of differentiation - training was inaccessible to students with less musical experience prior to beginning their training.

Not comprehensive - training was lacking in detail, specificity or structure.

Lack of support - students were expected to train themselves without staff support.

Undervalued - lack of time, focus and/or emphasis for sight singing training

Lack of professional support - training provided did not set students up for success in their performing careers.

Participant Feedback about Sight Singing Training (Q4 - Any other comments?)

16 of 34 participants answered this question.

Initial Conclusions

- Participants felt strongly that sight singing was not covered in detail - often not at all, and never 1-to-1.
- Sight singing training received was not robust enough to prepare them for professional life.
- Little support was given to students with less ability or experience (lacking in differentiation)



Focus Group - Findings

- After 10 sessions of 45 minute 1-to-1 sight singing tutorials (across 5 weeks), all 4 participants were present for a final focus group to discuss their experience.
- Discussion was designed to gain the participant's perspective on:
 - The course content - it's value, delivery and difficulty.
 - Their development - where they're strengths and weaknesses lie and how they've improved.
 - Perceived advantages and disadvantages in the delivery of the training.



ADVANTAGES TO TRAINING	DISADVANTAGES TO TRAINING
Good Content - course content was clear, well structured and manageable.	
1-to-1 delivery - 1-to-1 delivery was helpful and promoted better progress.	Overwhelming - training was, at times, difficult or overwhelming.
Basic Sight Singing - participants felt they had gained basic sight singing skill which they can now develop.	Online Delivery - online delivery created unique complications (ZOOM lagging, sound issues etc).
Score Reading - participants can read and learn new music quicker and in more detail.	
	Can't sight sing confidently first time - don't feel ready to sight sing.

Focus Group - Findings

Participant Response Data

Conclusions

- Questionnaire participants felt strongly that sight singing was not covered in detail - often not at all, and never 1-to-1.
- Sight singing training in most drama schools is not robust enough to prepare them for professional life.
- There is a lack of differentiation in the teaching of sight singing in drama school education.
- Visual materials (e.g. number signals in place of notes) (Autry, 1975) and coloured notation (Kuo and Ming-Chuen, 2013; Rogers, 1991, 1996; Colla, 2001) demonstrably simplify and stimulate musical learning and can improve sight singing proficiency
- Movement and somatic work is effective in reducing the workload on working memory (Pouw et al., 2014; Sepp et al., 2019) and mental workspace (Baddeley, 2007; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974; Wickens & Hollands, 1999), thereby promoting better sight singing (Lovorn, 2016) and stronger interval judgements and audiation (hearing melodic lines internally) (Forero-Hordusky, 2012; Houlahan and Tacka).

Recommendations

- One of my objectives was: *To use the data from this research project to inform future pedagogical practice in the teaching of sight singing (individually and in class settings).*
 - To develop the audio track resources to make them more compatible with online delivery
 - Explore other avenues for applying visual aid and somatic work - can we make the hand signals easier?
 - Develop and expand the sight singing model for group settings, allowing it to be employed in drama school class setting or musical theatre ensemble setting.



Recommendation



“The best teacher will not be confined to any previously laid out plan, but will from the different methods make out one of his own.”

(Mason in Demorest, 2001, p. 37).

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