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What methodological approaches, research designs and research methods might be appropriate to gather data from complex work-based settings? Why is it important for a researcher to critically evaluate these?

Why is it important for a researcher to apply due consideration to research ethics and what are the potential issues of insider research? How might these issues be mitigated against?

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Introduction

As a beginner practitioner-researcher, preparing to embark on voice-related research at master's level (focusing on singing teaching), for this assignment my aim is to begin to develop an understanding of the research landscape, which I hope will stand me in good stead for my development as a researcher in my field.

Although there are myriad possible research paths one could follow (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006), I begin with reflection on the nature of research itself, along with definitions of axiology, ontology and epistemology, which I understand form the basis of the methodological choices a researcher makes (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). This will lead on to evaluation of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches, following which I will examine a selection of paradigmatic research perspectives. From there, I will move to exploring a variety of research designs and methods, combining this with careful evaluation as to the ethical issues involved both in choosing an approach and conducting the research project. I will focus on the role of the insider researcher, which will be especially relevant to my future investigation into an aspect of my singing teaching practice. Whilst I have not finally decided on a research question for my project, I am keen to reflect not only on the work of other researchers (perhaps in areas different to my own), but to consider how certain approaches, designs and methods might align with my interest to discover how singing might enhance children's sense of belonging, both within school and outside.

The concept of research

At its most basic level, research could be defined as the process by which we seek to find out information and to reach conclusions through collection and analysis of this data (Bell and Waters, 2018). Crotty (1998) suggests that research is, perhaps above all, a process of getting to know why we think what we think and justifying our own choices. In a complex work-based setting (which I take to mean a diverse working environment where people have

differing needs and ways of communicating with each other (Michigan State University, n.d.)), an individual might engage in research for a variety of reasons. Not least of these might be the desire to enhance self-awareness and to improve one's practice (Brown and Duenäs, 2020; Scott, 2024). Having chosen to pursue academic research studies alongside my work as a singing teacher, I hope not only to add to my own store of knowledge, but to contribute to an ongoing conversation in my discipline, which might facilitate even small-scale change (Hitchings and Latham, 2021; Scott, 2024).

Defining axiology, ontology and epistemology

It is generally acknowledged in the literature that it is of vital importance for researchers to be conscious of and to reflect on their own philosophical assumptions: these relate to what we believe about the nature of reality (ontology), our beliefs about how one acquires knowledge (epistemology) and our overarching values and ethical stance (axiology) (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012; Willig, 2019). Together these constitute our personal paradigm, or the lens through which we view the world (Killam, 2013); they are closely entwined with each other (Scott, 2024). As Brown and Duenäs (2020) have pointed out, axiology has not always featured prominently in discussion of paradigmatic positions, but they maintain it is an important starting point for research. I would concur that axiology has significant implications for researchers, both in identifying a subject which will be valuable to research and in conducting this research ethically (Brown and Duenäs, 2020).

Views of reality, or ontologies, could be said to exist on a spectrum (Easterby-Smith, 2018). These range from belief in a single, verifiable 'truth' (realism) to a conviction that reality is socially constructed by individuals (relativism) or even, perhaps, that it does not exist at all (nominalism) (Easterby-Smith, 2018; Scott, 2024). I believe that I most naturally align with a relativist ontological stance, but the transdisciplinary nature of singing teaching (Gudmundsdottir et al., 2020) also leads me to reflect that I might be in search of a more objective set of scientific ideas about the voice, to enhance my skill set as a teacher. Whether or not this might fundamentally alter my own relativist position is something I would need to reflect on further.

Epistemology and research paradigms

The focus of epistemology is on how we gather knowledge and, in terms of research, how we choose to analyse it (Easterby-Smith, 2018). It has been suggested that research paradigms are the framework that the researcher selects to fit the research project and to

determine its direction (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). I would concur with the view that one's personal paradigm or positionality is difficult to separate from this, however, and that it is inextricably part of the entire research process (Holmes, 2020).

Paradigms range from positivism to constructivism/interpretivism. I will now consider both these approaches, along with a brief description of post-positivism and the transformative paradigm.

The concept of *positivism* is generally regarded as having been posited by the philosopher Auguste Comte, who was active in France in the nineteenth century (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). His central tenet was that there was only one verifiable reality and that the social world could best be studied with the same objectivity as the natural world, through scientific method (Denscombe, 2010).

Post-positivism has been described as an amelioration of this somewhat rigid approach (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012): there is less emphasis on absolute certainty and, with a connection to a critical realist ontology, recognition that there are limits to human objectivity. Although objectivity can still be aspired to, the possibility of researcher bias cannot be eliminated entirely (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012).

Constructivism/interpretivism acknowledges the importance not only of the participant's experience but that of the researcher as well (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Indeed, there is an understanding that reality is very much a subjective construction and that it is therefore full of complexity (Creswell, 2009).

There has been much discussion about what has been perceived as a fundamental opposition between positivism and constructivism, which has brought their respective advocates into conflict (Guba, 2009; Taber, 2013; Winter, 2021). However, as has been suggested, adopting a narrow perspective at either end of the scale of paradigms is not likely to be helpful to the advancement of the field of research (Hammersley, 1998; Taber, 2013). Whilst positivist research might aim for replicability in a wider context, constructivist research is likely to be more context-based and therefore less generalisable to a broader population; combining elements of the two paradigms could therefore be worthy of consideration (Taber, 2013).

At this stage, I personally cannot visualise a project involving either my students or other teachers which seems likely to benefit from following a solely positivist approach, to the exclusion of either myself as researcher or my participants' views. In this vein, I would like to draw attention to the transformative (or critical theory) paradigm, which holds a great deal of fascination for me.

The *transformative* paradigm (which Creswell, 2009 describes as having an advocacy- or participatory-focus) brings under its umbrella diverse critical theories, which have at their heart the desire to give voice to those who might otherwise be unheard and who have, at whatever level, tended to be marginalised (Winter, 2021). The paradigm emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, not only as a response to rigid adherence to more traditional research approaches, but in recognition that power structures at the heart of many organisations might be playing a part in excluding certain sections of society (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Although my eventual research project might be limited in scale and scope, in light of my current role as a peripatetic singing teacher, I would be keen to have an opportunity to examine existing structures within the educational establishments I am part of and to attempt to unravel some of the complex issues at play around such matters as diversity and inclusion (Mertens, 2010; Winter, 2021). Mertens (2010) also highlights an interesting point, suggesting that a transformative approach is concerned with understanding how certain views of reality have continued to perpetuate oppression in society.

Methodological approaches to research

Traditionally, links have been drawn between positivist epistemology and *quantitative* research. Quantitative research focuses on data which is capable of being measured (Lim, 2024). This means that the researcher will be working in the realm of numbers and statistics, perhaps starting with a hypothesis to prove or disprove about the way people behave, which might then be generalisable to a broad population (Walliman, 2011; Silverman, 2013). As Silverman (2013) suggests, there has tended to be a strong leaning towards using quantitative approaches in research, because results are clearly defined and appear to be immediately applicable for those wishing to demonstrate causes and effects. However, as Silverman (2013) goes on to say, quantitative research is perhaps not regarded as having the capacity to dig deeper into the assumptions which might lie behind professional practice; this might be considered one of its limitations, particularly in certain branches of social science research.

In contrast to quantitative research, *qualitative* research is primarily focused on advancing knowledge by exploring participants' own opinions and attitudes (Willig, 2016; Byrne et al., 2023). It does not seek to establish general laws (which might also be considered a limitation) but is specific to the population being researched (Byrne et al., 2023). The involvement of the researcher is also pivotal to the process (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggest that qualitative research is not about finding the one definitive answer to a problem, but that it involves navigating a complex web of people's thoughts and experiences. As an example, Byrne et al. (2023) conducted research into voter

attitudes to registering to vote, under the auspices of the Electoral Commission, using interviews to gauge participants' opinions. Their stated aim was not to represent the views of a wide population but to gain insight into what might be causing voter apathy or reluctance to vote among certain social groups, with their participants chosen purposively, based on a range of criteria (Byrne et al., 2023). The rigour displayed in this report and the depth of the questions which were asked could, I believe, prove to be a useful model for me when it comes to designing my own research project, especially if I choose to do qualitative research into the attitudes of my students.

In the field of voice pedagogy, as Winter (2021) indicates, there is a branch of academic literature which has favoured a positivist and quantitative stance, possibly giving the impression that only research which has a scientific basis is valuable. As a singing teacher, whilst I see the need for advancing my scientific knowledge about the voice, I also believe that teaching is enhanced by being aware of a broad range of perspectives. One of my possible research interests is in how the Alexander Technique (which has been described as a teaching method for improving body awareness and helping people to move more freely (NHS, n.d.)) might be of help to young singers. Exploring available literature on the Alexander Studies Online website (alexanderstudiesonline.com), I noted that there appeared to be few peer-reviewed journal articles related to the Alexander Technique adopting a solely quantitative approach. Considering possible reasons for this, I concluded that many of the studies were designed to encompass people's more subjective perceptions (which could be said to align well with the practice of the Alexander Technique), in some cases alongside numerical or scientific results. This might account for the prevalence of qualitative and mixed methods approaches.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in research leads to what has been termed a *mixed methods* approach, which uses both numerical and textual data (Scott, 2024). Whilst it is seen as being strongly aligned with the pragmatic paradigm, which is characterised by not limiting itself to a specific philosophy or view of reality, it is possible for it to be used in relation to a range of different paradigms, including the transformative (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Bryman (2007) highlighted a tendency for mixed-methods researchers to experience difficulties in integrating their qualitative and quantitative findings, for a variety of reasons; this possibly reflects either their own preferences or those of the audience they are writing for. Whilst this situation might have improved somewhat since the early 2000s, mixed methods research is still regarded as a time-consuming and demanding approach, albeit a potentially valuable one for work-based research (Scott, 2024).

Research designs

For this assignment, I have decided to focus on a selection of qualitative designs, because of the likely direction my own intended research will take. With my interest in my own role as researcher, I am keen to analyse the benefits and drawbacks of these designs in terms of their potential suitability for my needs.

Action research is driven by the imperative to bring about meaningful change in a specific social situation, and hence it has been found to hold strong appeal in educational contexts (Taber, 2013). It could be described as the epitome of insider research (with all its attendant ethical considerations, which I will go on to discuss); the researcher becomes involved in a collaborative process with participants and reflects on outcomes with them (Bell and Waters, 2018). As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest, it is appropriate for teachers working alone or as part of a group, which would make it particularly applicable for the peripatetic singing teacher undertaking research in a school setting, either alone or with other teachers. Kvammen, Hagen and Parker's (2020) qualitative action research study of collaborative song and dance teaching, incorporating the principles of the Alexander Technique, is an interesting example: they set out to overturn more traditional master–apprentice-style teaching by engaging both students and teachers in active dialogue with each other, through observations and interviews. Whilst acknowledging the potential for teacher bias to cloud their judgement, as well as issues of generalisability, they outline an approach which I believe could be a useful model for me, especially given the relevance of this topic to my own research interests.

Hermeneutics, as we understand it today, is rooted in philosophical ideas about interpretation of meaning which began to evolve in the middle of the last century (Laverty, 2003). In terms of research philosophy, modern hermeneutical enquiry is centred on textual analysis of the way people interact with each other and the language that they use (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The process of interpreting dialogue and narrative is therefore of central importance (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Another central feature is a pattern of thought which involves constant reference back to the broader research question (Paterson and Higgs, 2015; Scott, 2024). It is an approach which calls for deep reflexivity on the part of the researcher, which involves recognising that they cannot separate themselves from the research situation but are an intrinsic part of it. This includes being aware of potential bias and prejudice (Laverty, 2003). The value placed on reflexivity and the sharing of understanding (Paterson and Higgs, 2015) fits well with my own approach to teaching, which I would hope to be able to translate into fruitful research.

Grounded theory is an approach that was first developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, whilst observing hospital staff (Bell and Waters, 2018). It is characterised, not by beginning the process with a hypothesis, but by allowing theory to emerge from data, with no pre-established outcome (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The process is cyclical and repetitive, moving in both directions between theory and data, with adjustments being made to the theory as new data emerges (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Bell and Waters, 2018). The complexity of data analysis in grounded theory makes this, for some authors, quite a daunting prospect (see for example Bell and Waters, 2018). In addition, the potentially open-ended nature of the process of data collection could make this a challenging approach for a new researcher (Taber, 2013). However, notwithstanding Bell and Waters' (2018) salutary warning to researchers that they might find themselves unable to extricate themselves from the collection of data, which should theoretically continue until a saturation point is achieved, Taber (2013) stresses that grounded theory is frequently referred to in interpretive/constructivist research and that it exerts a strong influence upon it.

Research methods

Interviews are an adaptable research method, with an immediacy which allows a skilled interviewer to explore ideas and gain a deeper understanding of their participants (Bell and Waters, 2018). Qualitative interviewing tends to be either semi-structured (usually with a list of prepared, open-ended questions which enable participant perspectives to emerge) or unstructured (possibly with only an opening question to initiate conversation, allowing free movement of the discussion) (Grove and Gray, 2023).

Effective interviewing takes a lot of time, and unstructured interviews demand skill in handling the conversation so that helpful information will be elicited from the participant, particularly through actively listening to what they have to say (Silverman, 2013); the researcher also needs to remain aware of possible bias (Bell and Waters, 2018). If time allows (which I acknowledge might not be possible in my short research project), there is also a possibility of following up on the interview, allowing the participant to see and comment on the transcript, which increases the validity of the study and helps to ensure accuracy (Grove and Gray, 2023).

Focus groups have gained popularity among researchers in the social sciences, with the idea that a group of people will be brought together to engage in discussion on a subject (Bell and Waters, 2018). Although they might, on one level, be described as a type of group interview (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), the role of the researcher is different: they might be in the position of observer or facilitator, depending on how structured the conversation is intended to be (Taber, 2013; Bell and Waters, 2018). It is interesting to note

that, as Taber (2013) suggests, discovering and analysing points of agreement might be one of the primary purposes of the focus group, rather than focusing on individuals and their views, as would be the case in one-to-one interviews. There are ethical considerations to think about, as with all research methods; it will be particularly important to ensure that all participants feel able to contribute to the conversation and that they are not unintentionally marginalised, perhaps because some people are naturally more confident in expressing their opinions (Taber, 2013; Bell and Waters, 2018). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) make an interesting point, saying that focus groups tend to work better with people who are not well known to each other, perhaps because it might be easier for adults to express opinions among strangers. For my research, I would be keen to consider using the focus group method, particularly if I decide to work with parents or other singing teachers.

Survey/questionnaire/Likert scale: In a survey (used in its sense here as a data-collection method (Denscombe, 2010)), attention needs to be paid to the sample of the population which will be used and how they will be chosen; also relevant is whether the results are intended to be extrapolated to a broader group of people (Byrne et al., 2013). A questionnaire might be described as a list of questions which are used to gather responses from a range of participants in a survey (Bell and Waters, 2018). Likert and other satisfaction rating scales can also be a useful tool in qualitative and mixed-methods research, allowing insight into people's attitudes and feelings; however, there are potential limitations, including the inequality of the intervals between numbers on the scale, perceptions of what a high or low score might be and possible fatigue at being asked to complete yet another questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Bell and Waters, 2018). As with more general questions on a questionnaire, there is also no guarantee that answers given are wholly truthful (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Combining (or triangulating) methods such as Likert scales with interviews or focus group might be a helpful way forward for research into teacher or student attitudes, which I will consider when designing my project.

Ethics

This section begins with my acknowledgement that any research I undertake will be subject to approval by the reviewing board for my institution, ensuring that I meet all ethical requirements, as set out in clearly established guidelines. I will refer to The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) list of ethical principles to orient my research approach (see Appendix 1) and, since I will be involved in educational research, additionally, I will follow the extensive ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2024). I also wish to outline here the reasons why it is regarded as essential for a researcher to *be* ethical (on a deep personal level) (Williams, 2009) and to have a clear idea

of their own values (Bell and Waters, 2018). Whilst one might always intend to act (and hope to be viewed as acting) in a moral fashion, as Taber (2013) points out, there might well be grey areas to navigate in research; this is why clearly established ethical principles are so important. Avoiding causing harm to one's participants (with due consideration by the researcher of what this might involve) is paramount, along with a thorough examination of what it might mean to give informed consent, especially when applied to children, young adults and potentially vulnerable people (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This will include, among other things, a participant being assured of anonymity and that their participation is voluntary, along with their absolute right to withdraw at any point from the project (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Insider research

In my role as a singing teacher, I am drawn to reflect on what it means to be an insider (Bulk and Collins, 2024; Ferris-Day et al., 2024), particularly since I interact with several institutions, whilst feeling that I am somewhat on the periphery as a visiting teacher. In devising a work-based research project, I will most likely be involved in research with students (some of whom might be young children) or colleagues; I must therefore be aware that the duality of my position as both teacher and researcher will heighten the need to follow a strong ethical code and to establish trust with my participants (Ferris-Day, 2024; Scott, 2024). Being open about my processes as well as acknowledging my own biases will also be vital (Denscombe, 2010; Scott, 2024). Finlay (2002) proposes five overarching reflexive perspectives; these could provide a framework to follow and help me to avoid inadvertently prioritising my own point of view. Journal writing will be an important element in my reflexivity; it is regarded as a significant tool in insider research, enabling the researcher both to analyse and to contextualise their work (Ferris-Day, 2024). Whilst being an insider might bestow some advantages in terms of familiarity with setting/participants (Unluer, 2012), it would be wise for me not to minimise my own needs, for example, guarding against making myself vulnerable through personal disclosures (Ferris-Day, 2024). With careful consideration of methods, I believe insider research will provide opportunities for deepening my self-awareness and improving my teaching practice (Scott, 2024).

Conclusion

Research for this assignment has set me on the path to a deeper understanding of the range of methodological approaches, research designs and research methods which form part of research philosophy; wider reading in areas of relevance to my potential work-based project will be invaluable to me as I begin to narrow down the questions I wish to address. I have also gained awareness of the need for a deeply ethical and moral approach, which will

enable me to conduct research which is as rigorous and as unbiased as possible (Ferris-Day, 2024). Having evaluated the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, and the possibility of combining these approaches by using mixed methods, I believe that, whilst I could define myself as a qualitative researcher from the outset, I must remain open to the possibility of using mixed methods; this would depend on the time and resources I have available to me, as well as the needs of my project (Scott, 2024). New insights into my positionality have led me to conclude that I am most aligned with relativism and a constructivist/transformational worldview. I am drawn to the reflective and reflexive nature of hermeneutic enquiry: I think it would fit well with a project designed to gather the thoughts and feelings of my research participants. It would also situate me firmly within the research, which holds strong attraction for me (Haraway, 1988). In addition, although ethnographic and autoethnographic research designs have been beyond the scope of this essay, I would be interested to consider whether combining these two strategies might be a possibility in my future research.

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Appendix: ESRC research ethics principles

“Our six key principles for ethical research are:

- research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided they should be made explicit.”

Source: Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2021) *Framework for research ethics*. Available at <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/framework-for-research-ethics/our-core-principles/#contents-list> (Accessed: 30 January 2025).