

MA Professional Practice (Voice Pedagogy)

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Critically evaluate a selected range of methodological approaches appropriate for research in work-based settings, with due consideration to research ethics and insider research issues

In order to complete my work-based learning project required by Module 3, I will decide, in this Module 2, how to approach my research on my chosen topic. My future research will take place within my teaching studio and will involve some of my long-term students as participants, and, possibly, non-student volunteers, without vocal training, who I have met through my involvement in community and charitable projects. I will carefully consider my position as an insider researcher within each of these specific research environments, and ensure that I consider, separately, the ethics appropriate to collecting research data from each group of participants.

In my early reading, I came across the work of Michael Crotty (Crotty,1998), who advocates a structured but broad approach to selecting a research design, based on four fixed elements, namely epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. I found it helpful to keep this concise structure in mind when considering how to prepare my research plan and, as I reached decisions in relation to each of these elements, I was able to identify my position, ensuring that each of my choices made sense both independently and alongside each other.

I initially found it curious that Crotty does not include ontology as a separate element, this being one of the foundation blocks required to choose a research paradigm, but as I read further, and gained better understanding of the elements and concepts required to conduct a

structured research project, I was able to understand his treatment of ontology and epistemology together as a “theoretical perspective” (Crotty, 1988, p.18) based on his view that:

“Ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of meaningful reality....because of this confluence, writers in the research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually” (Crotty, 1988, p.11).

Nevertheless, I have dealt with ontology separately in this essay, and, in order to decide how best to approach my research, I have considered my ontological position, the epistemology and paradigm that would best support and frame my research, the main methodological approaches (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods) that align with my chosen paradigm, and the methodologies (also known as research designs) which I believe I should use to gather information, evidence and data to support my research and conclusions.

Ontology

Ontology refers to the core beliefs held by the researcher as to the nature of reality, and arises from “what” questions such as “what is true?”, “what is real?”, “what exists?”. Various ontological positions have been identified and named, with “realism” at one end of the spectrum and “idealism” at the other.

Realists believe that at least part of reality is ontologically independent of the human mind (Niiniluoto, 2002). In other words, there is only a single reality which can be studied or experienced, because a real world exists independently of human experience of it. Realism has been described as “the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them” (Phillips, 1987, p.205).

At the other end of the continuum, the theory of idealism (from which relativism has developed), is the notion that thought precedes the object, and that reality is the result of our constructions and interpretations; in other words, reality is constructed in the mind of the human observer, such that there is no single truth and reality is ‘relative’ according to how individuals experience it. It has been said that relativist ontology is the belief that reality is a finite and subjective experience and that nothing exists outside of human thoughts and consciousness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and that a relativist regards reality as indistinguishable from the subjective experience of it (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

A third ontological position has been identified as “materialism” (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Materialists believe that only “matter” exists, and that everything else, such as thoughts, feelings and human will, can be explained by matter and physical phenomena, so that reality exists regardless of human observers, and there is nothing beyond that final reality. Ontological materialism has been summarised as a “set of arguments which propose matter as the primary substance of all living and non-living things, including human beings” (Williams, 1961). Materialism and realism do have some common ground, and materialism has been called “realism”, since it does recognise the reality of the external world, but materialism and realism are not interchangeable terms:

“materialists (who hold that all that exists is matter, material forces, and physical processes) tend to be realists (who hold that reality is fully mind-independent), but the reverse need not hold (since what is real need not be materially manifest.)” (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015, p. 25).

What forms the Ontological Position of the Researcher

A researcher’s ontological position is formed upon the basis of assumptions made by the researcher, which in turn are formed by subjective factors such as the researcher’s values, environment and position. Every researcher looks through a lens created by his own belief systems, motives and limitations, which naturally determine which events are noticed and which are ignored, as well as which evidence is regarded as useful and which is discarded as irrelevant to the researcher’s argument. (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000). Who a researcher is, as a person, will impact the way in which they conduct their research, (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

I have been a professional vocalist performing a CCM repertoire for over 30 years. I am also a qualified lawyer and for almost half of my professional singing career, I maintained a parallel practice as a disputes lawyer at an international law firm. In 2012, I retired from the practice of law to enable me to focus on a full-time career as a vocal performer and teacher. My ontological viewpoint is partly influenced by my training and experiences in both the disciplines I have pursued. As a lawyer my work required me to critically review “truths” or facts presented to me by my client, to consider these within a framework of statute and common law precedent and to then prove my client’s case or “truths” via both qualitative and quantitative methods. As a singing teacher, I believe I follow a similar path. I rely upon my senses and my personal experiences and also heed the experiences and opinions of my

students to draw conclusions about the value of certain techniques and teaching methods. Additionally, I review, test and sometimes apply information and data which I've obtained by reading scientific studies to particular areas of my tuition.

My ontological position is not aligned with either an idealist or a realist extreme – I believe that facts do exist independently of me as a researcher (Easterby-Smith, et al, 2012), but I also believe that there is a more subjective element to reality and that some realities are layered and consist of several truths.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge; it examines the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and origin, its method of acquisition and its limits. As James Hiller explains:

“Epistemological assumptions are reflected in the theoretical perspectives, methodology, and methods of research studies. In other words, depending on a researcher's beliefs about what can be known (ontology) and how to approach coming to know it (epistemology), different decisions will be made toward designing an effective study” (Hiller, J, 2016 p.2).

The concepts of ontology and epistemology are inextricably linked for the researcher. It follows that ontological beliefs will determine a researcher's epistemological beliefs (Annells,1996; Crotty,1998).

As previously explained, the researcher's ontological position is the belief or statement of fact upon which his research is based. The researcher's epistemological perspective will be driven by his ontological beliefs and observations, and will determine the research questions to be answered.

Again, I found the writings of Crotty (Crotty, 1998) useful when considering the concept of epistemology. Crotty sets out 3 epistemological perspectives, namely, “objectivism”, “subjectivism” and “constructionism” (the latter closely linked to constructivism).

Objectivism, as an epistemological position, is aligned with a realist ontology and considers that the truth is objective and exists independently of human awareness of it. By removing the element of human bias, we can acquire knowledge. What is observed is not altered in any way by the observer, and the observer is not influenced by what they see. Objectivist

research is therefore useful in providing reliable and consistent results which can be applied in any context.

By contrast, subjectivism, as an epistemological position, is aligned with ontological beliefs positioned towards the idealism end of the ontology continuum, including relativist ontology, and it propounds that reality is reliant upon the individual's interpretation and therefore cannot exist independently of human perception or consciousness. For the subjectivist, knowledge is "always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.21).

Constructionism as an epistemological position is explained as knowledge which is constructed by individuals via their interactions with the world and each other, and the way they interpret this knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Crotty, 1998). As Crotty states, "There is no meaning without a mind" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8–9). However, meanings are not simply created by the mind as in the subjectivist approach, but emerge from constructions or reconstructions of human experiences. In other words, constructionism brings together objective and subjective. Knowledge can therefore change when new experiences result in new perceptions and awareness (Schwandt, 2003).

Whilst I have not yet chosen my research topic for Module 3, one of my many areas of interest as a vocal tutor is the impact of hormones on the voice, particularly in relation to transgender singers, and singers experiencing puberty or menopause. My ontological assumptions about the impact of hormones on singers are that there are certain realities which might exist independently of my research, but that these realities might be transformed subjectively by other factors capable of being uncovered during research on this topic. In other words, external factors may create multiple truths amongst individual singers, which would lean me towards a more relative ontology and a constructionist epistemology.

Paradigms

Choosing an appropriate research philosophy is an important part of the research process. A philosophical paradigm for research purposes provides a "basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 105). The researcher's choice of paradigm (which is determined by the assumptions a researcher makes as regards ontology and epistemology) dictates the "intent, motivation and expectations for the research" (MacKenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The term “paradigm” was first introduced by Thomas Kuhn and has been usefully defined as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values and techniques, and so on, shared by members of a given community” (Kuhn, 1962) and “a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts or propositions that orientate thinking and research” (Bogdan & Biklen 1998, p.22). As Lather explains, a research paradigm inherently reflects the lens through which the researcher sees the world and the researcher’s philosophical orientation will affect decisions made during the research process, including the methods and methodologies applied when carrying out that research. (Lather, 1986).

Thus, a paradigm is a theoretical framework made up of the beliefs that guide the research or practice of a community, and which influence the way knowledge is collected and interpreted. Thomas Kuhn, explained that there are many paradigms competing for acceptance (Kuhn, 1970) and these can be grouped into quantitative or qualitative paradigms, depending on the research methodologies employed.

In order to select an appropriate research philosophy, a researcher must have an understanding of the range of philosophies that might be applicable (Saunders et al., 2007). According to Krauss (Krauss, 2005), the paradigm selected by the researcher will determine the research methodology. Although it is not possible within the constraints of this essay to discuss every possibility, I will mention the main paradigm options.

The extreme positions on the paradigm continuum are Positivism and Interpretivism. Somewhere between these two extreme positions we find the Constructivist paradigm. Between all of these most commonly used paradigms we find further dilutions of these three broad positions, and often researchers will find their true home within one of these branches.

Positivism & Post Positivism

Positivists believe in a single truth and reality. Positivists find their answers by studying facts and gathering physical quantitative evidence as their proof. Positivists assert that in the same way study and observation can reveal the laws which contribute to our scientific view of the world, eg the law of gravity, there are equivalent laws which can be revealed about the social world. Positivists emphasise independence between the researcher and the object of the research. The researcher is able to, and must, put aside any bias or belief and see the world (or the subject matter of the research) for what it really is. In other words, positivism has an objectivist epistemology and a realist ontology (Annells, 1996).

The post-positivist paradigm evolved from the positivist paradigm, but post-positivists reject the positivist approach that a researcher can be an independent observer of the social world. Post positivists recognise the impact of bias, and believe that philosophical beliefs, background knowledge and values of the researcher can influence what the researcher observes and therefore concludes. Accordingly post positivists pursue objective answers by recognising and working with the researcher's pre-dispositions, and accept that qualitative data may also be useful and appropriate. Post positivists (many of whom also accept constructivist concepts) reject the idea that a researcher can see the world or the subject matter of the research perfectly, as it really is, since a person's constructed view of the world is dependent upon their perceptions, which are personal and may not in fact be accurate.

Post-positivist research principles emphasise the creation of new knowledge. Post positivist research is broad rather than specialised, and combines theory and practice (Ryan, 2006). The researcher's motivations for and commitment to the research are central to the research (Schatz and Walker, 1995). Post positivist researchers adopt a learning rather than a testing role, so that they learn alongside others, rather than conducting research on them (Wolcott, 1990).

A post positivist paradigm is more appealing to me than a positivist paradigm, however due to the fact that a subjective approach to qualitative research is uncomfortable for post positivists, I am not able to align myself completely with this paradigm.

Interpretivism

At the other extreme of the continuum, Interpretivists argue that objectivity is impossible and believe that research "is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.22).

Interpretivists embrace many truths and meanings and this paradigm focuses and relies primarily on reaching conclusions based upon human experiences and behaviours (Fossey et al., 2002). I find the definition suggested by Benoliel to be helpful and succinct when explaining the basis of the interpretivist paradigm:

"knowledge is relative to particular circumstances – historical, temporal, cultural, subjective – and exists in multiple forms as representations of reality (interpretations by individuals). There is no place for quantitative data as a research methodology within the interpretivist paradigm." (Benoliel, 1996, p.407).

Constructivism

The constructivist approach is related to interpretivism. As Schwandt explains,

“Proponents of these persuasions share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p.118)

Constructivists believe that we each construct our own understanding and knowledge of the world by our personal experiences and reflecting upon those experiences (Honebein, 1996; Elliott et al., 2000; Arends, 1998). Accordingly, new knowledge is built upon the foundation of previous learnings, and the researcher’s knowledge of these previous learnings influences the new knowledge he constructs (Phillips, 1995). The process is an active one and meaning is constructed only through active engagement (for example via experiments). Although the information itself can be passively received, understanding it must be based on the connection with existing knowledge and the learning process.

The constructivist believes that learning is a social activity and that our thoughts and processes are conditioned by our environment and our community. Therefore all learning is achieved by sharing knowledge obtained through our social interactions (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). Knowledge is regarded as being obtainable only within the human mind and does not need to be grounded in any world reality. (Driscoll, 2000). As the learning process continues, researchers will adapt and update their interpretation of reality.

Constructivism is divided into three broad categories, namely cognitive (learning actively constructed by learners depending on their stage of cognitive development), social (learning is a collaborative process) and radical (knowledge is invented not discovered).

Interpretivism and constructivism have common ground as regards ontology and epistemology and both rely on qualitative data to prove research undertaken. Several of the ideas in the interpretivist and constructivist approaches arise from hermeneutics, phenomenology, and from critiques of positivism.

Other Paradigms

There are several paradigms which have evolved to challenge the absolute views of positivism and interpretivism. These include Feminism, which aims to research matters from a female perspective, leading to a female vision of reality, derived from research carried out

by, for and about women. Other paradigm options which have evolved include, Transformative, Critical Reality, Postmodernism, Participatory, and Deconstructivist, (description and discussion of which is beyond the scope of this work, but I mention them purely to illustrate the abundance of paradigms for a researcher's consideration) and Pragmatism, which is the paradigm that I believe best aligns with my ontological and epistemological positions, and which I therefore deal with separately below.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism, presented in the 1870s by Charles Peirce (Peirce, 2014), later developed by William James and John Dewey, aims to connect thought and action.

Pragmatists believe that there is no single reality, but multiple realities and they adopt elements of both positivism and interpretivism models, to seek answers to problems and enquiries. Pragmatists reject the extremes of positivist and interpretivist and focus, without being constrained by rules, upon what works as a matter of fact. Pragmatists believe that what works in a practical situation is true, and what does not is false. Therefore the truth is not absolute or unchangeable; it is both changeable and practical and may be disproven as a truth (Dewey et al., 2003). Dewey regards action as superior to knowledge, and practice as superior to thought. In Dewey's world, only thoughts which are useful and active and instigate change are true.

I favour an approach which involves examining, reviewing and evaluating concepts in terms of their practical application and not being bound by a philosophical theory and its 'rules', therefore Pragmatism is the paradigm which I feel most closely represents my own world view, and which is most appropriate for me to use when carrying out my research.

Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research

The paradigm with which the researcher identifies will direct the way in which evidence, information and data is collected to support the research and its conclusions.

A researcher who favours a positivist paradigm will conduct their research using quantitative methods. Quantitative research produces objective data that is communicated through statistics, measurements and numbers. Commonly used methodologies for gathering quantitative data include surveys, experiments, content analysis and meta-analysis. In the field of vocal pedagogy, the SOVT experiments conducted and reported by Dr Inge Titze,

who has promoted the benefits of straw exercises for singers, are good examples of quantitative methods being used to inform and communicate research (Titze, et al 2021; Titze & Laukkanen, 2007; Titze, 2009). The downside of a quantitative approach is that the information collected lacks context, since it is based only on quantifiable data without regard to any external influences or human component, and it can therefore provide a less detailed and comprehensive picture. Quantitative methods can also be time consuming and may fail if the data obtained is not an accurate representation of the whole study group. Advantages of this type of research are that it can produce concrete and reliable data and is useful for providing data that covers larger study groups.

There are two types of quantitative data collection which I might wish to use alongside qualitative data (mixed methods approach), depending upon the research topic I confirm. The first is completion of factual surveys, where participants provide answers to the standard questions asked, based on their factual experiences. I believe that this method would produce valuable information, providing the survey and its questions were carefully thought out and designed (and with regard to ethical and insider-researcher considerations). I also believe that I might be able to use an experimental approach to part of my research question, for example by having two identical groups of participants participate in a vocal exercise study where one group is given a particular exercise regime and the other group is given none, with a view to discovering whether the specific exercise regime is beneficial. I have carried out experiments of this nature before to test the impact of regular SOVT exercises with my students and although there were unavoidable flaws in the study (for example I was unable to control the diligence of the participants carrying out the exercises) the results obtained via basic quantitative methods were still indicative and useful.

By contrast, a qualitative research method is used to collect and analyse non numerical data, and this data can be collected by the researcher via first hand observation, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, surveys etc. Qualitative research is more exploratory by nature and involves an interpretive approach, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.3).

Some of the advantages of qualitative research include the flexibility to pursue any unexpected issues and ideas which might arise, and to explore these new ideas during the research, thereby examining processes more fully, and increasing opportunities to develop empirically supported new ideas and theories, which may have significant or better relevance and interest for practitioners. (Bryman et al, 1988; Alvesson, 1996). Qualitative

research also allows the researcher to provide more generalised data, yet still arrive at a conclusion.

Instead of focussing on the validity and value of certain methods and methodologies, the paradigm which I have chosen, Pragmatism, enables researchers to base choices on the relevance of methods and methodologies, “in terms of carrying us from the world of practice to the world of theory and vice-versa” (Kelemen and Rumens, 2012, p.1).

Some of the various methodological approaches available to the researcher for conducting qualitative research, include Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Hermeneutics Research.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher would use a combination of methods, such as conducting interviews, reviewing documentary data, watching videos, to understand the unique lived experience of the participants and explore a phenomenon. The aim is for the researcher to uncover the essence of the phenomenon.

Grounded Theory, on the other hand, where data might be collected via interviews, review of documents etc. seeks to provide an explanation or a theory behind the phenomenon.

Ethnography aims to examine the shared patterns of behaviour and beliefs within a cultural group and this is undertaken over a longer period of time, perhaps by methods such as observation or interview. It is not a method that I will be relying upon.

Hermeneutics research enables the researcher to interpret and understand the researched phenomenon by means of subjective examination. It is conducted through experience and reflection on that experience. I may apply Hermeneutics when carrying out my research project.

In line with my chosen paradigm of Pragmatism, I will not be constrained by the rigid rules of some of the other paradigms and can use triangulation when I carry out my qualitative research. Through triangulation, I can use multiple methods or data sources to explore and explain a phenomenon (Patton, 1999). This triangulation approach can have the added benefit of testing validity through the convergence of information retrieved from various sources. Triangulation is consistent with a mixed methods approach where both quantitative and qualitative data can be considered and both triangulation and mixed methods are

consistent with my chosen paradigm of Pragmatism.

There are several qualitative methods of gathering data and information which I believe I may use, including interviews, focus groups, case studies and qualitative observation.

Interviews as a research method may be based on tightly structured interviews where, for example, questions are posed in a specific order; semi-structured interviews where the organisation of chosen topics is less rigid and the sequencing of questions can be participant led; and unstructured interviews where the topics are participant driven and the interviewer lets the conversation evolve organically rather than imposing any structure to the interview. My previous career experience has covered each of these interview scenarios and I will therefore draw on this experience and use interviews to collect at least part of my qualitative research data.

There are various forms of interviewing for research purposes, informed by different theoretical perspectives. These forms of interview include phenomenological interviews where focus is on the experiences of the participants and the meaning of those experiences to the participants (DeMarrais, 2004; Seidman, 2012); feminist interviews (DeVault and Gross, 2007) where interviewers ensure through their language and approach that they are working with participants in respectful and ethical ways to promote female equality and make women's voices heard; hermeneutic and epistemic interviews (Dinkins, 2005; Brinkman, 2007) where interviews draw on the Socratic notion of dialogue and researchers and participants engage in dialogue as co-enquirers, focussing on the reflections of all parties involved and interpreting questions and responses as the dialogue evolves; and ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) where there is an exploration of the meanings that participants ascribe to actions and events in their cultural worlds, observed by the interviewer over a significant period of time.

As the non-exhaustive list of interview approaches identified above suggests, interview styles and conceptions will vary and are not one "monolithic, predictable type of encounter" (Koven, 2014 p.500).

Focus groups are another commonly used means of gathering research data. Focus groups are collective conversations (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). The main aim of focus groups is "to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a select group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group" (Liamputtong, 2013 p. 4).

Focus groups are often used in the field of pedagogy where students are participants. Alongside the benefits of focus groups there may be disadvantages, including the difficulties of analysing large amounts of data collected and transcription issues (Bryman, 2012).

Other means of qualitative data collection include use of questionnaires, surveys, group discussions, case studies and observations.

A combined approach of the extremes of quantitative and qualitative is the Mixed Methods approach. The Mixed Methods approach allows for a more comprehensive review and analysis of information collected; it is preferred by researchers who want to present their research without the gaps that could be left if either quantitative or qualitative alone were used. A researcher can use mixed methods to examine different aspects of a single research question, or use both qualitative and quantitative data separately in a mixed methods approach to prove their research.

Ethics and Insider Research.

Research ethics are the moral principles that govern the way in which researchers produce their work. Anyone who carries out research must consider the ethics of their practice and procedures, including the risks to study participants and, in some cases the society, culture or environment within which the research takes place. Some of the basic ethical steps which should be taken in order to ensure beneficence and non-maleficence, are minimising risk of harm to participants (physical, psychological, social, financial); obtaining informed consent and ensuring that participants are never coerced or deceived; protecting anonymity and confidentiality of participants; enabling participants to withdraw from the research study; and avoiding deceptive practices. These are some of the basic considerations, but each study will raise its own ethical considerations and the researcher must think diligently as to the impact of their research and the way in which it is conducted.

Whilst undertaking my research, I will be an insider researcher and must maintain awareness of this, to adhere to ethical considerations and ensure the integrity of my research. I must consider the advantages and disadvantages that my insider position might produce; a potential loss of objectivity and bias would be a disadvantage, yet familiarity and greater understanding of the participants and environment might produce more candid and comprehensive qualitative data. The challenges posed by insider research depend on the closeness of the researcher to what is being researched (Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2011). The

proximity of the researcher to the research matter may change during the course of the research (Hellawell, 2006). As an insider researcher, I must be mindful of 'researcher bias', whereby my personal values and experiences influence my research questions, design and data collection procedures (Chavez, 2008) and take steps to minimise this potential bias through the different stages of my research process. As I will be carrying out my research at my vocal studio, I must also be mindful of any potential bias towards the group as a whole and as between participants individually, to ensure that my research is undertaken in a reliable and objective manner.

Conclusion

My work for this module has given me valuable focus and insight as regards my philosophical beliefs concerning knowledge and its acquisition, and although I have yet to finalise my research enquiry for module 3, I am drawn to a pragmatist research approach, likely supported by mainly qualitative data, but allowing for the inclusion of useful quantitative data (mixed methods), depending on the research topic I choose.

(4944 words)

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