An Existentialist View of the Student-Teacher Relationship in Higher Education Arts Instruction

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Purpose: To consider how the existentialist principles freedom and responsibility may inform the student-teacher relationship in higher education vocal instruction as a way to mitigate inconsistent and unemotional singing in students. This study can generalise and have implications beyond music to other arts inquiries.

Theoretical Framework: Drawing upon some of the key principles of existentialism, I consider how inconsistent and unemotional singing may be repositioned. This theoretical lens provides the foundation upon which to consider how these principles highlight certain underdeveloped aspects of vocal instruction in the student-teacher relationship in higher education. Specifically, I examined several existentialist principles of Jean-Paul Sartre (1984, 1993, 2001, 2007) including existence, essence, freedom, and responsibility, as well as the anguish and abandonment that at times stem from the realization of freedom and responsibility and how they may be considered to help better facilitate consistent and emotionally engaged singing.

When existentialism becomes the framework for research in education, it leads to other questions that have framed my research. A voice instructor has the opportunity to guide or facilitate the student through this unfolding or self-discovery in voice study. In this approach, the instructor faces her freedom and responsibility in the role of facilitator in the voice studio, while leading the student to explore her freedom and to become more self-aware as a singer and performer.

Methods and Data Sources: The research was oriented as a hermeneutic phenomenological study. The aim was to explore how students experienced their essence as singers and performers and, specifically, how singers experienced the process of singing consistently and while emotionally engaged. In this research study, I explored the essence of the individual and viewed changes in the students’ essence; both in their own perception of their essence as a singer and in my interpretation, through detailed descriptions of their experience as well as interpretation of data. I positioned myself as a researcher, and an artist-teacher. Positioning myself as an insider allowed me to reflect upon my own aesthetic experience while watching the students perform. The students in this study were instructed in voice in a manner that attempted to encourage them to explore their freedom and to face responsibility in existentialist terms.

Three students from the ages of eighteen to thirty years of age were purposefully selected with various voice types, at various levels of vocal development, and from various backgrounds in terms of vocal ability. Each student was quite different. Including this diversity of students as participants presented a way to determine if the teaching method is applicable and helpful for a variety of students engaged in vocal study. The study cycle was a school term of approximately sixteen weeks. All students were female, as I used current students as participants and I did not have any male students in my studio. I instructed two undergraduate music students in higher education majoring in voice, in addition to one conservatory student in the approximately same age range not enrolled in a university music program, as a way to compare and interpret the students’ development and experience.
Video analysis, interviews, audio recordings, and reflective journals were used to capture the experience of these students (Gadamer, 1977; Regan, 2012; van Manen, 1984, 1990; Weber, 1986). Lessons were videotaped approximately one time per month to gauge changes. Public performances were videotaped approximately one time per month to monitor change and to gauge the student’s ability to give emotionally engaged and connected, as well as technically consistent, performances. Video analysis was very valuable as a means to gain insight for a hermeneutic interpretation of the students’ experience in this study (Flick, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Spiers, 2004; van Manen, 1990). As well, it was a way to closely monitor posture and any indication of physical tension. Videos of the students also offered a way for me to aesthetically experience the students' performances, to gauge their emotional engagement, and to decide whether there was a change in these or not.

**Findings and Analysis:** As indicated, the research method was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology. As I aimed to consider existentialist principles to foster students’ increasing sense of their own responsibility and freedom as vocalists, the process highlighted the following emerging themes: awareness, resistance, fear, acceptance, and becoming at varying intervals. Each participant experienced the themes as I facilitated the student-teacher relationship with the influence of responsibility and freedom.

**Educational Implications of the Study:** The study will be of significance to those in the field of vocal instruction and vocal pedagogy degree programs as some are quite ambiguous and compartmentalised.

The application of the existentialist principles of Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialist philosophers has been considered in relation to general education in the classroom. There has been no significant research in vocal instruction and the influence of existentialist principles. This study presents the field of the philosophy of education with new research that may prompt discussion and debate in pedagogical approaches to vocal instruction. This debate may result in a refocus or reflect of teachers’ methodologies. An instructor who is willing to reflect and to explore his or her own freedom in how he or she instructs consequently may help students engaged in vocal study explore their freedom and reach a higher level of performance.

Further research will offer a view of the student-teacher relationship through an existentialist lens beyond vocal instruction, and how these principles may inform and influence the student-teacher relationship in other arts-based instruction. This instruction may include music (instrumental and vocal), dance, and acting. This examination of the student-teacher relationship will explore how these broad principles may influence one-on-one arts instruction perhaps enhancing current secondary and post-secondary instruction, and may enhance educational philosophy for the preparation of new teacher in teacher education programs.

**References**


