Background and Identification of the Problem:

- Prevalence of inconsistent and emotionally unengaged singing in higher education voice students. Lack of authenticity in emotional connection to music and text.

- Perhaps how students are being instructed does not help mitigate this problem. This is a teaching problem.
Brief Overview of Some Teaching Approaches Currently Used in Higher Education

**Approaches Reviewed**

1. Vocal science and Anatomy
2. Imagery and Imagination
3. Natural Approach
4. Holistic Approach
5. Contemporary Approaches

Perhaps just using one or two of these approaches addresses students in a compartmentalised way, not attending to the singer as a complete individual.
Consideration of an approach based in Existentialist thought

• Existentialism puts the individual in charge and able to determine her outcome, her essence. The premise of Sartre’s existentialist thought is existence before essence.

• The student and instructor are the “authors” of their own project.

• J. P. Sartre tells us, “Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). The study explored this application in vocal instruction.
Responsibility

“Thus, existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him” (Sartre, 2007, p. 36).

- Both instructor and student must accept responsibility in the student-teacher relationship in the voice studio.

- Responsibility in this application, is the precursor to exploring freedom (free will and artistic freedom).
Responsibility

• **Student**: Acceptance of responsibility by the student can lead to more consistency in singing as the student becomes more conscious and aware of her instrument and the goal to gain independence in singing.

• **Instructor**: Acceptance of responsibility by the instructor with the goal of fostering consistent singing leading to more emotional engagement through a flexible, varied teaching approach.
Freedom

“It is we, ourselves, who decide who we are to be” (Sartre, 1984, p. 34)

• When one is in possession of herself, in other words has accepted responsibility, she has the ability to explore freedom.

• Freedom in this study was considered freedom as physical freedom in singing, free will to determine essence and choices in artistry (artistic freedom).

• **Student**-Once she has accepted responsibility, she gains the ability to determine her essence and outcome as a singer.

• **Instructor**-Entering student-teacher relationship with a varied skill set. She has the opportunity to use freedom and free will to decide what approach can be effective for the individual student.
The Method

- Hermeneutic phenomenological study undertaken to interpret the lived experience of a group of students.


Themes Unearthed:
1. Awareness
2. Resistance
3. Fear and Anguish
4. Acceptance
5. Becoming
Conclusions

• An existentialist framework is an effective teaching approach.

• Compliments existing teaching practice in higher education vocal instruction.

• Beneficial to pre-service vocal pedagogy students to help craft an idea of how to enter the student-teacher relationship in the voice studio.

• May generalize beyond the voice studio to other arts based one on one instruction.
Thank You!  Questions?

References


Summary for Single Paper Session

**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.

**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. In discussing these tenets of Sartre’s existentialist thinking and those stemming from them, I examine how these principles may be considered and may be relevant to how vocal instructors can 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. What does it mean to teach and what does it mean to facilitate? These are not the same. Anyone can teach, but the act or art of facilitating is quite different, particularly in the field of vocal instruction. Many can teach voice by offering sequential exercises, imitation, imagery, ways to release tension, and instruction of aspects of vocal anatomy, but the question remains as to whether or not a compartmentalized approach leads to consistency, emotion, and freedom in singing. Harper (1955) notes, “Existentialism is concerned about the unfolding of the individual as a whole in the situation in which he finds himself” (p. 223). This description parallels much of the task of the vocal instructor. 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. In existentialism, “man is called to know himself; it is not optional and a matter of luxury” (p. 228). These principles give the teacher the opportunity to explore the question of what it means to facilitate as opposed to what it means to teach.

**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 attempted to view 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, an insider, and an artist-teacher. Positioning myself as an insider allowed me to reflect upon my own aesthetic experience while watching the students perform (Herr & Anderson, 2005). 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. I selected students with various voice types, at various levels of vocal development, and from various backgrounds in terms of vocal ability. I selected a first year music student from my higher education voice studio, a mezzo-soprano, as a participant. She was new to higher education vocal studies. She had engaged in private voice lessons focusing on classical repertoire for several years prior to entering the music program at the university. Her lessons did not entail a great deal of vocal technique, nor did they include much instruction in expressive singing. The second student participant, a soprano, was a second year student from my studio engaged in vocal studies at the university. This student had just over one year of vocal study at the higher education level in my studio prior to entering this study. Prior to her first year of higher education vocal studies, her primary focus was in musical theatre singing, whereas the focus in higher education for our university is on classical repertoire. Working with this student gave me the opportunity to fine tune the teaching approach that I began to use with her in her first year of the music program by narrowing the focus of my vocal instruction to a theoretical framework clearly based in existentialist principles. It also presented me with the opportunity to gauge progress or regression in her vocal development when instructed with an existentialist framework as my foundation. Finally, the third student participant was a new student to my Conservatory voice studio. She was an adult student, who worked full time in a job completely unrelated to music. She was a non-university student interested in vocal development, and an individual who was primarily a choral singer prior to participating in this study. I thought it would be interesting and relevant to gauge her development and experience in this study in comparison to the students fully immersed in a higher education music program. Each student was quite different from the others. 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. I noted changes in the level of consistent singing, breath support, physical tension, clarity of tone, and posture, as well as changes in emotional engagement in performance. 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). It helped me view the performance and to reflect upon and interpret whether or not singers were engaged or “in the moment.” 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 (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

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.

Each participant experienced the themes as I facilitated the student-teacher relationship with the influence of responsibility and freedom. One participant effortlessly experienced the notion of being responsible leading from awareness to acceptance and becoming. The other participants experienced resistance, and fear when faced with being responsible for their outcome and determining their essence as singers. In time, they experienced a feeling of acceptance and thus a glimpse of what they could become.

Educational Implications of the Study: The study will be of significance to those in the field of vocal instruction and vocal pedagogy degree programs. Many teaching philosophies currently used in higher education institutions appear to have significant ambiguity, and some appear compartmentalised, not addressing the student holistically. The study explored the use of a varied set of teaching tools to be used by vocal instructors influenced by the existentialist tenets of responsibility and freedom. This influence may help foster consistent and emotionally engaged performances in students studying voice. The tenets examined may be considered by teachers currently instructing in higher education. As well, the study may offer students in vocal pedagogy degree programs a method to use when they begin to instruct.

The application of the existentialist principles of Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialist philosophers has been considered in relation to general education, and the use of arts 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 and vocal instruction with new research that may prompt discussion and debate in pedagogical approaches to vocal instruction. This debate may result in a refocus or may encourage current vocal instructors to reflect on their methodologies. This can be beneficial to students. 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.
References


