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Defining Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy: A New Framework

Kari Ragan



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EVIDENCE-BASED VOICE PEDAGOGY IS A TERM used synonymously with science-based voice pedagogy, function-based voice pedagogy, or fact-based voice pedagogy. However, there is a precedent for defining evidence-based voice pedagogy (EBVP) with a broader understanding of the term. This new framework provides a context for an inclusive perspective of what constitutes evidence in the field of voice training. The gold standard of evidence for any voice teacher is to achieve efficacy in the form of vocally efficient and artistic performances. Tools necessary to be an effective teacher are acquired through a broad continuum of resources. By definition, evidence-based voice pedagogy is the integration of voice teacher expertise and experience, student goals and perspectives, and relevant research into voice science and production to effectively evaluate and identify technical inefficiencies to guide students toward vocally healthy and efficient, stylistically accurate, and artistic performances. EBVP is a voice pedagogy framework that acknowledges the importance of both scientific voice research and anecdotal evidence, along with consideration of the experience acquired by a teacher, and the importance of individual student needs. EBVP provides a new framework that honors traditions while simultaneously leading to the integration of fact-based principles of voice production in the field of voice teaching.

ORIGINS OF EVIDENCE-BASED MEDICINE AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

The framework for evidence-based voice pedagogy has its origins in the field of medicine. In the early 1990s evidence-based medicine (EBM) came to be defined as “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. The practice of EBM means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research.”¹ EBM is an approach to patient care intended to use the latest research to optimize decision making. An important achievement of EBM has been the development of the critical analysis of research methods to summarize the best available evidence.² Guidelines outline what constitutes viable research to use in medical diagnosis; however, it is an approach to medicine consisting of more than scientific research. The modern framework of systematized standards of care of EBM

Journal of Singing, November/December 2018
Volume 75, No. 2, pp. 157–160
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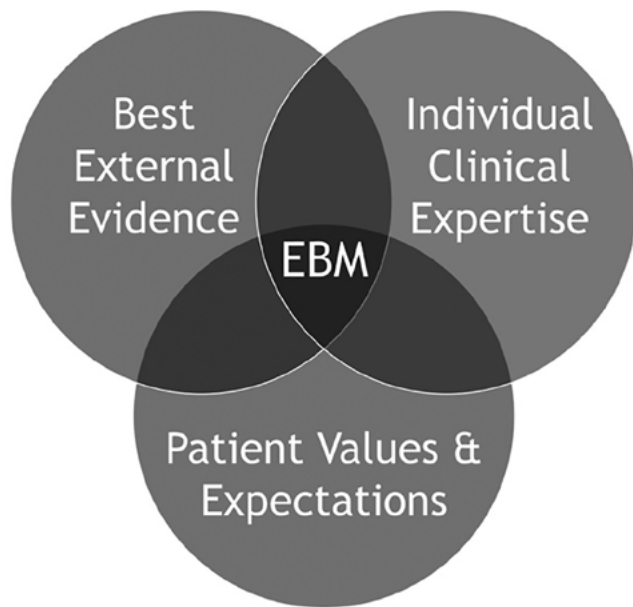


Figure 1. Evidence-based medicine.

integrates three important components: 1) best external evidence, 2) clinical expertise, and 3) patients' values and preference (Figure 1). Evidence-based medicine is "a systematic approach to clinical problem solving which allows the integration of the best available research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values."³

The framework of EBM eventually advanced to other behavioral health arenas that label it evidence-based practice (EBP), a term that has different connotations for different professional disciplines. Speech and hearing sciences adapted EBP in 2004 when ASHA created the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's Coordinating Committee on Evidence-Based Practice and laid out a framework for incorporating EBP into the guidelines. ASHA defines EBP as the integration of three essential components when working with a client: 1) external scientific evidence, 2) clinical expertise/expert opinion, and 3) client preferences and values "to provide high-quality services reflecting the interests, values, needs, and choices of the individuals we serve" (Figure 2).⁴

Adapting EBM and EBP into a framework of evidence-based voice pedagogy (EBVP) is a logical next step for the voice teaching profession. Using EBM and EBP as a guideline, relevant scientific evidence/best available research evidence become **voice research**,



Figure 2. Evidence-based practice.

clinical judgment/clinical expertise become **voice teacher experience and expertise**, and patient values and preferences become **student goals and perspectives** (Figure 3).

Component 1: Voice Research

Voice research refers to research relevant to voice and singing voice production. Relevant fields may include voice science, singing voice, sports science, cognition and learning, medicine, speech and hearing, acoustics, psychology, and historical voice pedagogy.

EBM and EBP have systematized guidelines to identify various levels of quality of research; in the medical discipline, this is especially crucial. Voice pedagogues will review and evaluate peer-reviewed journals from a variety of fields of research. Acknowledging the importance of scientific research and the rigorous controls it often undergoes, in the field of voice pedagogy, there is still value in anecdotal evidence and its application to teaching. This is a necessary inclusion and adaptation of EBM/EBP to EBVP. In the field of voice pedagogy, even relevant experiential writing must have publication standards such as those in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, value is found in the anecdotal methodology of historical pedagogy as well as rigorous, controlled studies in the field of voice.

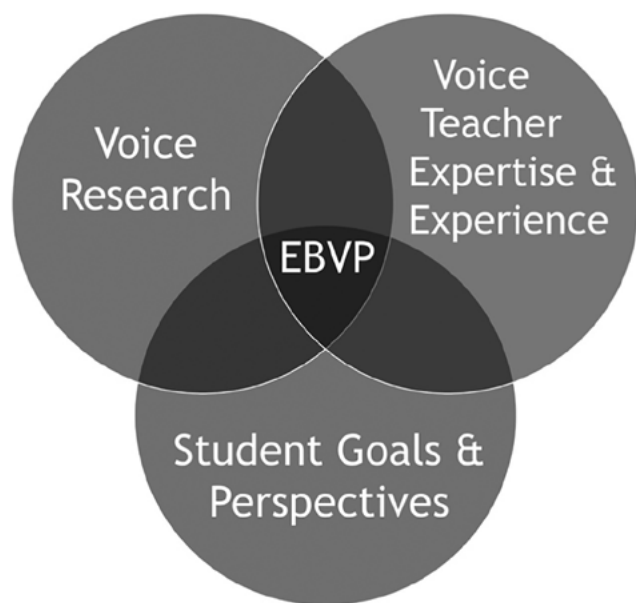


Figure 3. Evidence-based voice pedagogy.

Component 2: Voice Teacher Expertise and Experience

Voice teacher expertise and experience encompass the knowledge acquired as both a performer and teacher. Expertise consists in the effective use of highly trained skills and understanding in the promotion of vocal technique and health, musicianship, language, stylistic accuracy, and artistry, as well as the ability to efficiently identify and formulate solutions to technical challenges. Expertise necessitates the use of creativity, instinct, observation, and exploration to ensure that solutions are responsive to the individual needs of the student, in order to provide optimal vocal outcomes.

Voice teacher expertise is the mastery acquired through practical experience. Increased expertise is acquired in many ways. This is a crucial aspect of the framework of EBVP as it acknowledges the importance of a traditional empirical approach that demonstrates effective teaching methods acquired through experience. For centuries, teaching singing has used a master-apprentice model as the conventional method of one-to-one lessons.⁵ This affords teachers the opportunity to acquire knowledge through exploration and experience as they assess the outcomes of their teaching approach. In the field of voice, great traditions are passed down through generations and deserve our respect. Those traditions

must be valued and integrated into a modern understanding of principles of voice production.

In addition to the significance of the experience of teaching in itself, aspects of teaching singing are acquired through one's own training and performance experience. It is the totality of these numerous factors and experiences teachers acquire on stage and in the voice studio that informs the multifaceted approach necessary to be an effective teacher. Combined, voice teacher experience and expertise ultimately become the "art of teaching."

Component 3: Student Goals and Perspectives

Student goals and perspectives acknowledge that optimal pedagogic/teaching outcomes require consideration of the interests, values, needs, and choices of the individuals we teach. It recognizes the value of a humanistic approach that accounts for factors unique to the individual that will impact the learning process. This requires voice teachers to take a collaborative approach in order to identify the student's goals and perspectives both at the outset of and throughout the learning experience.

Student goals and perspectives integrate a holistic approach to voice teaching. It requires empathy toward physical, emotional, and mental factors during a voice lesson. There are numerous factors to consider when mentoring not only vocal skill acquisition but career guidance. Voice lessons must include considerations for the individual's preferences and consider values regarding personal and vocal well-being. Students are more than their voices; they are a whole individual requiring an integrated approach to voice teaching.

CONCLUSION

Evidence-based voice pedagogy creates a framework for a comprehensive approach to voice instruction by acknowledging traditional empirical approaches of past centuries, understanding the importance of teacher experience, and recognizing the relevance of voice science research. Further, it considers the importance of student goals and perspectives as individuals in a collaborative relationship with the voice teacher. The previous assumption of evidence-based voice pedagogy seemed to signify scientific research alone. The importance of this EBVP framework is that it does not exclude anecdotal evidence acquired from years of teaching. Quite the

contrary, voice science research provides a foundation from which to build an approach, but the art of teaching comes from experience. One does not learn to teach voice by reading a book on singing or the mechanics of voice production. Successful teaching comes from a variety of informational and experiential sources, relevant research, and individual studio experience; no one element alone is sufficient. While acknowledging that scientific study requires rigorous controls for objective qualifications, one still finds value in experiential evidence. However, those traditions require validation through collaboration with relevant voice research as the foundation of a teaching approach. Language must be carefully chosen during voice lessons in order not to perpetuate myths about voice mechanics. Demonstrating efficacy is the most essential component of any teaching approach. This can be achieved through experience, experiment, observation, exploration, and intuition—all of which occur during a voice lesson and are accounted for in the framework of EBVP. A lifetime of acquiring experience in the studio and on the stage, and the ability to interpret these experiences through a fact-based lens ultimately serves our students most effectively. EBVP is a dynamic integration of evolving voice research, voice studio experience, and student goals and perspectives in the day-to-day practice of voice teaching.

NOTES

1. David L. Sackett, William M. C. Rosenberg, J. A. Muir Gray, R Brian Haynes, and W. Scott Richardson, "Evidence-based medicine: what it is and what it isn't," *British Medical Journal Publishing Group* 312. 7023 (January 13, 1996): 71–72.
2. Izet Masic, Milan Miokovic, and Belma Muhamedagic, "Evidence Based Medicine—New Approaches and Challenges," *Acta Informatica Medica* 16, no. 4 (2008): 219.
3. Ibid.
4. American Speech Language Hearing Association (1997-2018); <https://www.asha.org/research/ebp/introduction-to-evidence-based-practice/> (accessed April 1, 2018).
5. Laura Crocco, Catherine J. Madill, and Patricia McCabe, "Evidence-based Frameworks for Teaching and Learning in Classical Singing Training: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Voice* 31, no. 1 (January 2017): 130-e7.


Kari Ragan, soprano, is Artist in Residence at the University of Washington School of Music Voice Department where she teaches applied voice, voice pedagogy, diction, and vocal literature courses. Dr. Ragan works in affil-

ation with the University of Washington Department of Otolaryngology, and Speech and Hearing Sciences Clinic as an SVS to rehabilitate injured singers. Additionally, she has maintained a private voice studio for over thirty years teaching emerging and professional singers in both classical and contemporary commercial music (CCM) genres.

Dr. Ragan holds degrees from Indiana University (BM, MM) and University of Washington (DMA). In 2012, she was awarded the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship, awarded jointly by The NATS Foundation and The Voice Foundation, in recognition of her contribution to the training and science of the singing voice. Her research for this fellowship was "The Impact of Vocal Cool-Down Exercises: A Subjective Study of Singers' and Listeners' Perceptions."

Further professional achievements include the NATS Foundation Pedagogy Award, Wicklund Singing Voice Specialist Certificate (2010-2015), and The New York Singing Teachers (NYSTA) Association's Distinguished Voice Professional Certificate. Dr. Ragan has presented at conferences for NATS, Voice Foundation Symposium, National Center for Voice and Speech, PAVA, and International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT), and the Vennard Symposium. She is a founding member and organizer of the Northwest Voice: Art and Science of the Performing Voice Conference, a charter member of the Pan American Vocology Association (PAVA), and is a NATS Foundation Board Member. Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Singing* and the *Journal of Voice*, among other publications. Dr. Ragan serves as the coordinator and host of the NATS Chat webinars.

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