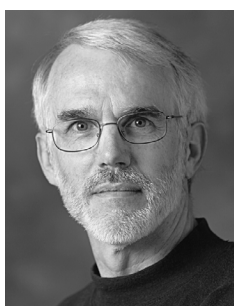


Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy (EBVP), Part 2: Voice Teacher Expertise and Experience

Kenneth Bozeman and Kari Ragan



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[Editor's Note: This article is the second in a multi-part series that explores and further defines each of the three components of the Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy (EBVP) framework, as outlined in Kari Ragan's 2018 article "Defining Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy: A New Framework."¹ Each article will discuss a single component of the tripartite framework, which consists of Voice Research, Teacher Expertise and Experience, and Student Perspectives. The order in which these components are presented in this series should in no way be seen as creating a hierarchy of importance.]

As defined in a seminal 2018 *Journal of Singing* article,

Voice teacher expertise and experience encompasses 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.²

The present article contributes to the teacher experience and expertise component of the evolving Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy (EBVP) framework. In it the authors present views based on decades of experience as both performers and teachers. The answers found are grounded in an ever growing understanding of voice research, but also have emerged from the authors' personal vocal journeys and the trial and error process of pedagogic exploration during voice studio application. Voice teachers learn through the lived experience of practice-based voice pedagogy, in other words, through teaching itself. The work of training singers often involves strategies that necessarily go beyond what can be fully vetted in the science lab. As outlined in the earlier Voice Research component of this multi-part series of articles discussing the tripartite EBVP framework:

... the basic process of engaging in the scientific method begins with an **observation**, which leads to a **question** about what one is seeing or hearing, which leads to a **hypothesis** about why things are the way they are. That hypothesis

leads to a **prediction** that is then tested with an **experiment**. The results of the experiment are observed and considered in relation to the original observation as the process starts over with a new iteration, a revised hypothesis, and prediction resulting in a retest.³

Voice teachers serve human beings in need of habilitation and are ethically obliged to respond holistically to what the singers present. We do not have the luxury of completely isolating variables, narrowing focus, and limiting strategies, nor may we have an “untreated” control group, all of which are necessary parameters of scientific studies. And yet, things learned in the studio have great ecological validity. They work because, in addition to being grounded in the teacher’s prior knowledge and preparation, they arise from intelligent, attentive, creative, and intuitive response to what the student is presenting. As teacher experience grows, effective strategies emerge. Eventually teachers accumulate a robust number of subjects, and their pedagogic explorations are impressively longitudinal. The results of such experience form a different, less rigorous, but nonetheless invaluable kind of evidence in the ongoing development of pedagogic truth. Voice teachers should have justifiable confidence in training approaches thus gained; they are in fact the source of the majority of the heuristic solutions employed in voice instruction every day. The teacher expertise and experience component of EBVP intentionally includes creativity, instinct, observation, and exploration as essential elements of effective voice teaching, since these facets profoundly contribute to the art of teaching.

SOURCES OF EXPERTISE

Teacher expertise draws on three main sources: 1) personal training, that is, their own vocal and pedagogic journey; 2) performance experience; and 3) on the job teaching experience. These three components are not experienced in isolation from relevant voice research. Indeed, the learner ideally begins drawing on all relevant resources at an early stage. This article will focus less on available research of teacher expertise, but rather on the practice-based experience portion of each component. Emphasis will be on the experiential, intuitive, and observational nature of the way a teacher’s expertise evolves.

PERSONAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE

A guiding principle for which there is no substitute must be frankly acknowledged: In developing expertise at any skill, *you primarily learn by doing*. We must not minimize the importance or value of that process. Practitioner empiricism involves evidence gained by experience, observation, and informed trial and error exploration. This is both what we do in the voice studio and what we did as young singers in training.

The first source of teacher preparation is one’s own personal vocal journey. The deliberate, internal process of learning to sing lays the very foundation of one’s future pedagogy. It involves mentors, peers, and personal practice history. Challenges faced and mastered are instructive. It is, of course, crucial to have had effective mentors. It is also important to have been open minded, curious, and honestly self-evaluative during that learning process. One’s own psychological resilience in the midst of a journey that had no guaranteed outcome will have impacted our openness to learning during that process. In developing pedagogic expertise, it is typically necessary to have trained one’s own singing to relative mastery. Such training is not experienced in a vacuum. Seekers gradually accumulate information from available pedagogic traditions and resources. They begin to be exposed to concepts through their teacher, pedagogic course work, discussions with peers, personal reading, and possibly through exposure to voice science along the way. Voice teachers gradually develop their ears, eyes, and somatic sense for functionally efficient singing appropriate to the genres being studied. For most, one’s personal singing journey becomes the foundation for teaching expertise.

PERSONAL PERFORMANCE EXPERIENCE

In their own singing, aspiring teachers should, in addition to the paramount goal of effective communication, have the goal of optimizing performance excellence—of saying what you have to say as effectively as you are able to say it. Preparing and then delivering a successful performance provides yet another opportunity for learning that cannot be gained any other way: skills such as sensing audience response in order to establish an effective communicative connection with them, vocal pacing through a taxing program, adapting to the size

and acoustics of a hall, and, at times, managing personal health circumstances. The effectiveness of the performance is more significant to learning than the particular venue. One also learns evaluative diagnostic skills, as well as what excellence *can* be, by observing performances of student colleagues, mentors, and advanced masters, both live and recorded. Teacher expertise requires that one develop a performance informed pedagogy.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The third, and perhaps most vital component of teaching expertise is the teaching experience itself. While teachers must prepare as thoroughly as feasible beforehand, teaching can be processed and developed only on the ground, in the experience of teaching others. That process has inherent instructional value. As mentioned above, it builds upon one's own learning journey and gradually assembled understanding from observing the singing and teaching of others. As you then teach, if you are open-minded and attentive (that is, if you are fully present), you gradually develop an increasingly sophisticated diagnostic ear and eye for functionally successful singing, both in the professional arena and in your own students. One's vicarious empathy for assessing what students are doing and the creativity to strategize effective ways to modify their behavior to good effect gains greater specificity.

Our studio process is both empiric and heuristic. It is a practical, exploratory, intuitive form of problem solving, based on plausible, possible, creative solutions. Like science, it uses disciplined longitudinal observation, reasoning, past experience, experimentation, trial and error methods, and has a relatively high subject number. Unlike science, it necessarily is less rigorously constrained. But we needn't apologize for pedagogic views thus gained, and rather must promote appropriately respectful venues for the sharing of heuristic (effective, good enough) solutions. Heuristic solutions are not guaranteed to be perfect or final, but must be sufficient for the immediate goals, and efficient with the available time.

INTERACTIONS WITH COLLEAGUES

Ideally our experience continues to be fed by collegial interactions and dialogue. Having an openness to learning from colleagues—from those close at hand as well as

from those with whom we perhaps disagree—facilitates growth as well as ethical professionalism. Such challenges help maintain balance in pedagogic emphasis and priority and stimulate new views and approaches. Ironically, human nature too often seems to make us more willing to learn from distant experts than from the colleague next door. This is unfortunate. If productive exchange with colleagues is not happening informally, it may need to be facilitated by a deliberate structural framework, such as planned topical discussions at some regular interval. Lifelong learning requires lifelong curiosity and openness to growth and change. Such learners are able to refine their expertise as long as they teach.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Many fields require continuing education units (CEU) or continuing education credits (CEC) in order to maintain one's licensure in their profession. In the unregulated field of voice teaching, it is incumbent upon each of us to commit to developing a process for continuing education. It must be self-directed, self-motivated, and frequently self-funded. A commitment to lifelong learning means taking advantage of continuing education opportunities that support teacher expertise. These may be in the form of pedagogy courses, conferences, workshops, written resources, emerging research, active mentorship that can come in many forms, including a practicum as required in other fields, and one's continued personal singing development. Voice teachers are often eager to collaborate, further providing circumstances to gain knowledge and insight. We are fortunate to work in a field with a wealth of opportunity for ongoing learning and mentorship; and one that is rich with organizations producing high level conferences, research, and opportunities for continuing education. Of course, in a field fraught with social media, self-marketing charlatans, and a wealth of self-proclaimed experts, we also must possess good judgment to know where true expertise does *not* exist. Critical thinking skills are imperative so that voice teachers may discern how to evaluate evolving pedagogic information.

The past several decades have brought about many exciting changes to the field of voice teaching, including an explosion of information and potential knowledge for which a voice teacher might be responsible. This can be

both thrilling and overwhelming. Both theoretical and practical knowledge are necessary. Theoretical knowledge would include anatomy and physiology, acoustics and perception, cognition, voice health, body health and wellness, hearing health, music literacy, research literacy, and terminology. Practical knowledge would include diagnostic skills, repertoire (genre specific), piano skills, voice classification, diction, acting and movement, technology (both in teaching and performing), and amplification.⁴ This is by no means an exhaustive list of the theoretical and practical knowledge relevant for teacher expertise, but it provides context for the planning of continuing education. Each category involves considerable study and may include subtopics for further exploration. Rare is the circumstance today in which teachers can limit specialization to a single genre or aspect of singing. At the very least, knowledge of the benefits and principles of cross-training has become necessary.

The expectation of continuing education brings up a further question: Are voice teachers generalists or specialized experts? Perhaps we are both. We must be knowledgeable enough to have a general breadth of

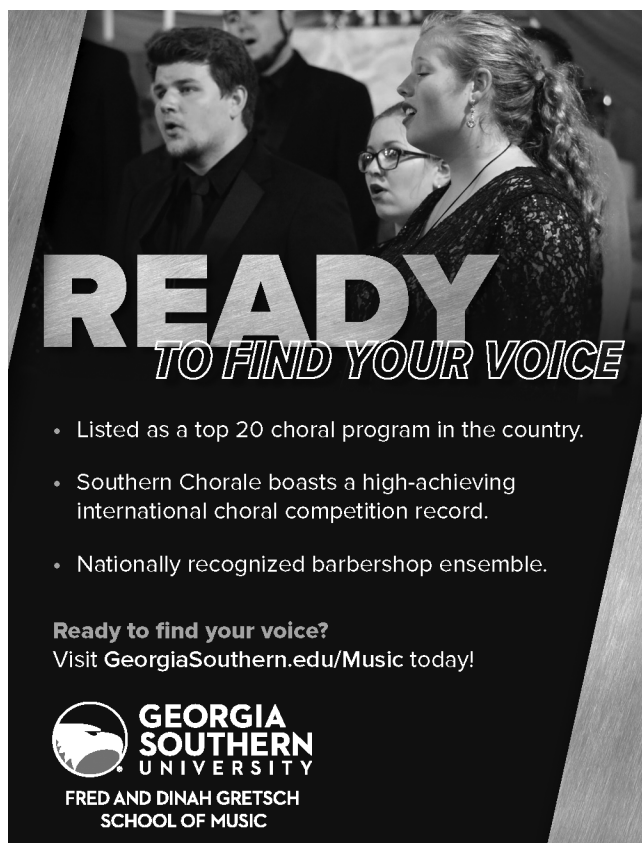
practical and theoretical knowledge; however, no individual is expert in all facets of teaching singing. Voice teachers, either by personal interest or by employment circumstance, invariably focus more deeply in specific areas. This can be optimized by enabling them to become specialists in particular genres, voice health, acoustics, cognition, or any one of myriad related cognate areas, but also to refer to specialists in areas with which they are less familiar. In the field of medicine this is referred to as scope of practice, which describes the services the qualified health care professional is considered sufficiently competent and thus legally permitted to undertake. In all fields, including voice pedagogy, a similarly collaborative approach can best serve the needs of those who have entrusted themselves for professional care. Our field is vast and varied, involving many roads to travel and aspects to explore. We must choose wisely and ethically the boundaries that are appropriate to place upon the sphere of our individual practices.

CONCLUSION

Rightly understood and vetted for quality, voice teacher experience and expertise contribute crucial evidence to the ongoing conversation and search for pedagogic truth. Within the framework of EBVP, teacher expertise and experience encapsulate the voice teacher's deep responsibility toward highly trained skills and expected knowledge in addition to the important instincts and gifts as a teacher required for effective application of such knowledge. This is the art of teaching. It is acquired through the individual's lived experiences as a performer and teacher and continues to evolve throughout one's career.

NOTES


1. Kari Ragan, "Defining Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy: A New Framework," *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 2 (November/December 2018): 157–160.
2. Ibid.
3. Lynn Maxfield and Kari Ragan, "Evidence-Based Voice Pedagogy (EBVP): Voice Research Component," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 4 (March/April 2021): 543–547.
4. Ian Howell and Kari Ragan, "Knowledge Explosion and Its Impact" (presentation, Voice Foundation Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice, Philadelphia, May, 2021).



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Singer, author, and voice pedagogue, **Kari Ragan** holds degrees from the University of Washington (DMA), and Indiana University (MM, BM). Dr. Ragan was the recipient of the prestigious Van. L. Lawrence Award (2012), the NATS Foundation Pedagogy Award (2009), the Wicklund Singing Voice Specialist Certificate (2010), and was selected to be

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ourselves.

James Joyce, from *Ulysses*



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