

Practitioner Research: Advancing Singing from the Inside Out

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We are excited to present a special issue of *Australian Voice* for 2024 themed “Insights and Innovations from Singing Practitioner Research”. This issue is a collaborative effort between *Australian Voice* and the Singing for Health Network (UK). It highlights practitioner research across diverse contexts, from studio pedagogy to singing groups for health and wellbeing.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle's book *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (2009) presents practitioner research as a systematic investigation of practice that generates new knowledge “from the inside” by practitioners themselves. It integrates theory and practice and is seen as a professional “stance” rather than simply a project, activity, or add-on to practice. Adopting an “inquiry stance” means we are open to critical reflection to improve practice and extend our thinking about what we do, how we do it, who for, and why.

Importantly, therefore, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) encourage practitioner researchers to problematise the “ends” question by asking what purposes (or ends), other than the obvious, might an activity exist for? What purposes exist for singing beyond being a form of entertainment? As we will see in this special issue, singing can provide a pathway to self-expression, intercultural connection, increased confidence, social connection, inclusion and belonging, and much more.

The publication of this issue is timely—there has been a distinct turn towards practitioner research within the voice research community and the arts in health. This year, the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) published a book,

Practitioner Research in Voice Studies, comprised of articles from the journal *Voice and Speech Review*, edited by Rockford Sansom (also a member of the *Australian Voice* International Editorial Board). An article written by *Australian Voice* co-editor Melissa Forbes is included in that book. The article calls for more research by singers, with singers, for singers (Forbes, 2024). She argues practitioner research:

- helps bridge the divide between rigorous academic research and relevant practical applications (see Winter, 2021);
- should adopt qualitative approaches to research to complement the dominant scientific paradigm;
- brings valuable embodied knowledge and expertise to research methods and findings;
- can uncover subtleties and nuances that outsider researchers might miss;
- can explore research questions that emerge from actual practice needs, yielding findings relevant for other practitioners;
- helps build a more nuanced understanding of singing as a vitally important human activity (Forbes, 2024).

When considered within the field of arts in health, practitioner research brings further valuable perspectives including:

- practice-based experience of how singing positively impacts health and wellbeing;
- experience in creating psychologically safe environments for group singing activities;

- a deep understanding of leader/facilitator-participant relationships;
- appreciation of the complexity of musical interactions (see Camlin et al., 2020; Camlin, 2023);
- knowledge and experience of the broader context within which group singing acts as a health-enhancing activity, including community needs and resources, healthcare system integration, referral pathways and partnerships, cultural considerations, and accessibility and inclusion requirements.

For these reasons, practitioner researchers have much to offer the field of singing for health and wellbeing. Practitioner research responds directly to some of the key questions and recommendations from Dingle et al.'s (2019) agenda-setting paper, including contributing to theoretical frameworks, better understanding the role of the facilitator in group singing interventions, and innovatively using qualitative methods to complement quantitative studies.

In short, practitioner researchers have much to offer to enhance our understanding of singing and its many benefits, whether in performance or singing for pure enjoyment and social bonding.

The articles in the special issue fall into two broad categories: singing for health and wellbeing and studio practice. They are presented in an order that loosely groups them thematically, with articles that span both domains in the middle of the issue.

Our issue opens with a contribution from Dave Camlin and Tiri Bergesen Schei. *Reaping the Harvest of Joy: Practitioner Enquiry into Intercultural Group Singing* reports on a study in which singers from community choirs in the UK and Norway shared personal stories of their participation. The study demonstrates that the activity increases bonding and bridging social capital and highlights the potential of group singing as a potent form of civic imagination and for developing intercultural empathy.

Vicki Bos and colleagues examine a novel choir program developed for international students at an Australian university in their study, *UQ Voices: Building a Community Choir for International Students Following the Global Pandemic*. Their research finds that choir participation promotes social connections and community building across cultural and language barriers, with members reporting positive social and emotional benefits despite some learning challenges.

In her study, *Breath-Focused One-to-one Singing Sessions as a Means of Developing*

Authentic Voice in Females with Anxiety, Claire Turner examines how lessons incorporating breathwork and psychological theory can help females with anxiety. Her findings suggest that this approach helps alleviate physiological tensions and promotes a more positive relationship with one's voice, indicating potential benefits for both voice pedagogy and mental health applications.

Singing Together, Growing Confident: Social Relationships and Music Performance Anxiety in Pre-adolescent Voice Students by Rebecca Yarnold investigates how social relationships shape experiences of music performance anxiety among child voice students aged 7–12 in a group voice lesson setting. This practitioner-based case study followed eight children through a 10-week program of group voice classes culminating in a public performance, highlighting the significant role of peer relationships and social feedback in shaping children's experiences of music performance anxiety.

Sue Carson's article *The Multi-Genre Female Singer: Practitioner Insights* presents findings from a qualitative investigation involving interviews with eighteen female professional multi-genre singers. Carson (herself an accomplished multi-genre singer) reports on practical methods, approaches, and techniques for multi-genre vocal performance based on performers' perspectives.

Broadway to Beijing – Training Musical Theatre Singers in China, by Chuting Huang, Irene Bartlett, and Margaret Schindler, explores the potential for elements of Beijing opera to be used as cross-training tools to assist female singers in accessing a healthy and style-efficient voice production to meet the increasing demand for suitably skilled musical theatre singers in China.

In their study *Vocal Inclusivity in Improvisation Pedagogy*, Leigh Carriage and Rachael Thoms address the limitations of traditional instrumental-based approaches to teaching improvisation in higher music education. Drawing from their experiences at two Australian universities, they present eight ear-training strategies to enhance vocalists' improvisation skills and self-confidence, offering a more equitable framework for teaching vocal improvisation at the tertiary level.

The forum contribution *Impacts of the Relax Breathe Harmonise Program in Yorkshire, UK* by Emily Foulkes, Emma Baylin, and Abigail Mann-Daraz examines a 10-week specialised program developed in collaboration with NHS respiratory physiotherapists, Long COVID teams, and individuals living with Long COVID. The

promising outcomes suggest the potential for further development of multidisciplinary interventions in this emerging field.

We end the issue with a book review—*Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy: The Art and Science* by Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown, edited by Scott McCoy (Inside View Press, 2023). Reviewer Matthew Frampton considers this book a comprehensive guide that masterfully bridges voice science, musical theatre traditions, and teaching practice to provide voice teachers with practical strategies for developing singers. It is an invaluable resource for emerging music theatre pedagogues, offering clear pathways to nurture students' technical skills, artistic expression, and individual voice.

On the more practical side, this year we introduced our online peer review system Scholastica. This system has improved our processes and efficiency, resulting in a better publishing experience for our authors. We now offer “online first” publication, so authors do not need to wait until the issue is compiled to publicise their research!

We have greatly expanded our pool of reviewers with this special issue, primarily via our international networks. We are sincerely grateful to our editorial board members and peer reviewers for their time and effort in supporting our mission to publish high-quality singing voice research.

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We hope you find this issue illuminating and inspiring for your practice.

Dr Melissa Forbes and Dr Julia Nafisi
Co-editors

Emily Foulkes
Guest editor

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