

Reflective Paper

Research Methods in Health, Outdoor Education and Physical Literacy

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AI Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Willig (2022) encourages approaching research as an adventure, characterised by exploration, challenge, and the possibility of personal transformation; an idea that directly aligns with the principles of outdoor education (Ewert and Sibthorp, 2014). In both paradigms, reflective practice is essential for bridging the gap between raw experience and profound understanding. The purpose of this essay is to critically reflect on the process of undertaking a small-scale research project within outdoor education: “how do novice and experienced outdoor instructors differ in their perceptions of risk?”. This essay explores the qualitative, interpretivist research design adopted in the study, recognising that its limitations require critical consideration. It examines the methodological decisions made, considers possible alternatives, and reflects on my personal experience as a researcher, including how positionality, ethical responsibility, and research skills shaped both this study and my future practice.

Existing literature establishes that effective judgement and decision-making are essential in dynamic outdoor environments (Smith and Wilkinson, 2020; Martin et al., 2017). Decisions informed by risk perception can determine how instructors balance safety and challenge, thereby shaping whether outdoor experiences fulfil or inhibit their pedagogical potential (Collins and Collins, 2013; Priest and Gass, 2005). However, limited research has compared how instructors at different developmental stages interpret and enact risk within their decisions. Further, contemporary debate highlights the rise of a risk-averse culture, in which increasing concerns around safety and liability are reducing young people’s opportunities for autonomy and development (Harper and Obee, 2021; Savery et al., 2017; Stan and Humberstone, 2011). Although such concerns are not new (Mortlock, 1984), these trends appear to have intensified in the 21st century (Gray et al., 2026). Therefore, understanding how outdoor instructors perceive and enact risk remains important, as their judgement may determine whether outdoor education can preserve the developmental benefits of carefully managed challenge seemingly absent from the modern world.

Research Design

Research exploring risk and decision-making has recognised that these phenomena are context-dependent and difficult to reduce to simple measurable variables (Wolff, Larsen and Øgaard, 2019; Zink and Leberman, 2001). As a result, contemporary research has

increasingly moved beyond purely positivist approaches, adopting qualitative designs and aligned paradigms better suited to examining how outdoor practitioners interpret and construct meaning in their practice. Previous studies have used interviews to explore instructors' decision-making processes, enabling access to reflective accounts and nuanced reasoning that underpin complex professional judgement (Christian, Berry and Kearney, 2017; Mees, Toering and Collins, 2022). Other qualitative studies have revealed that risk perception is shaped not only by objective conditions, but also sociocultural factors (Clinch and Filimonau, 2017; Connolly and Haughton, 2017). These precedents supported the use of a qualitative design for this research project, in which the focus was on how instructors at different developmental stages interpret, justify and enact risk in their practice. As a result, this study was positioned within an interpretivist paradigm underpinned by a bounded relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology. While this paradigm allows multiple legitimate realities of risk (Crotty, 1998; Moon and Blackman, 2014), it was less suited to making definitive claims about actual risk or establishing causal relationships between instructor expertise, risk perception, and professional judgement. Consequently, findings from this study were reported using cautious interpretive language, reflecting the epistemological stance and the associated limitations of self-reported data (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith and Sparkes, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed consistency to compare instructors across experience levels, with flexibility to probe nuanced accounts of practice (Brinkmann, 2022). Interviews proved valuable in this study because they enabled participants to recount specific incidents and reflective learning processes, revealing how decision-making was sometimes based on a "feel" for the situation, which may have been difficult to capture through more structured methods (Smith and Sparkes, 2016). The conversational nature of the interviews allowed follow-up questioning to unpack how such intuition had developed. However, high-quality interviews also rely on participants' verbal fluency and confidence to articulate complex thoughts (Kirkevold and Bergland, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2018). This was particularly relevant in this study, where the novice participant spoke English as a second language. By comparison, the novice interview lasted half the time of the experienced participants; although their responses remained valuable, linguistic constraints may have limited the depth with which nuanced reasoning processes were expressed. Another limitation of interpretivist interview research is that it relies on self-report, which may be affected by social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonté, 2020). In this

study, all participating instructors were known personally to the researcher; while familiarity may have supported trust and openness in the interviews, there was potential for responses to be shaped by existing relationships, and for instructors to present themselves in a professionally favourable manner (Floyd and Arthur, 2012).

Participant sampling was purposive; selecting instructors across novice, proficient, and expert categories enabled direct comparison of developmental stages. The sample size allowed in-depth interviewing and manageable analysis within the project timeframe, however, having only one participant represent each category limited the extent to which findings could be attributed definitively to experience level rather than individual differences. In addition, recruiting participants through the researcher's existing professional network may have introduced convenience bias and reduced diversity of perspective (Roiha and Ikkänen, 2022; Mercer, 2007). For example, all instructors predominantly operated within the same geographical location in England; this potentially narrowed the range of risk cultures represented, limiting transferability to other outdoor settings. Furthermore, defining expertise primarily through years of practice and qualifications potentially oversimplified professional expertise, which may also depend on other factors such as reflective capacity, as demonstrated in this study's findings. However, it was consistent with established parameters used to categorise leader expertise in comparable studies (Mees et al., 2020; Barry, Collins and Grecic, 2024) and is replicable for future research.

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it aligned with the qualitative, interpretivist design and allowed patterns of meaning to be developed across instructors' accounts. The analysis adopted a primarily inductive orientation; themes were generated through close engagement with the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2021). However, the analysis was also theoretically informed by Professional Judgement and Decision-Making (PJDM) literature, as the research aim was also concerned with how risk perception influenced instructors' practical decisions. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke (2021) who argue that inductive thematic analysis is never theoretically neutral, as the research focus inevitably shapes interpretation. This positioning enabled the analysis to remain grounded in participants' accounts while also interpreting their responses in relation to PJDM, including the role of intuition, adaptive judgement, and reflection. While reflexive thematic analysis was appropriate for this study, it also required critical awareness that themes were interpretive constructions shaped by the researcher. To strengthen the

credibility of this process in the future, member-checking or engagement with a critical friend could be adopted, as used in comparable outdoor qualitative research (Barry, Collins and Grecic, 2024; Mees, Toering and Collins, 2022; Christian, Berry and Kearney, 2017).

Alternative paradigms and designs could have approached the research question differently. Triangulation may have strengthened this study by combining interview accounts with additional forms of evidence (Patton, 1999). For example, ethnographic observation during live practice may have provided richer behavioural evidence to support interview data (Reeves et al., 2013; Stan and Humberstone, 2011), revealing whether instructors' reported enactments of risk were reflected in practice. However, this approach would have raised significant logistical and ethical challenges, requiring more robust consent and safeguarding procedures, particularly where children or vulnerable people were involved in live outdoor activities (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; BERA, 2024). Alternatively, a mixed-methods design using a quantitative measure such as the Meertens and Lion (2008) Risk Propensity Scale could have indicated instructors' broader risk-taking or risk-avoidance tendencies across a larger sample, followed by selective interviews exploring how these tendencies are shaped by experience and professional judgement. However, such a measure should remain supplementary rather than replace qualitative methods, in order to retain the interpretive depth needed to capture the professional responsibility, contextual judgement and pedagogical intent involved in risk decision-making within outdoor instruction.

Researcher Experience

Armour and Macdonald (2012, p. 9) argue that research is inherently "political"; it reflects one's identities and priorities, and they encourage researchers to critically examine their motivations for pursuing a particular topic. For me, this project was indeed shaped by political tensions within my current professional context, as evidenced in an excerpt from the reflexive journal I maintained throughout the research process:

"I have some somewhat emotionally charged opinions about [the research topic] due to the organisational pressures and demands I am facing in my current work climate".

These personal feelings required sustained reflexivity throughout the research process to ensure that data collection and analysis were not driven by my pre-existing frustrations (Willig, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2021). On reflection, the purposive sampling strategy may

have constrained this process. Recruiting instructors with whom I had positive professional relationships likely facilitated privileged access and supported rapport (Roiha and Iikkanen, 2022; Garton and Copland, 2010; Mercer, 2007); however, because those relationships are partly grounded in shared professional values and attitudes, participants' accounts did not substantially challenge my own beliefs. As a result, those shared values may have constrained exposing alternative perspectives in this study (Berger, 2015). Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 60) advocate for a creative engagement with the "space between" insider and outsider researcher positions, emphasising that both stances have unique contributions and limitations, and that effective research involves balancing these aspects. Therefore, recruiting participants who were somewhat known to me professionally, but not part of my immediate network, may have helped balance shared understanding with greater interpretive breadth.

Conducting qualitative research was a new experience for me. My undergraduate studies were exclusively grounded in quantitative designs, so the decision to adopt a qualitative approach was deliberate and challenging, requiring a shift in how I acquired and interpreted data, and in my understanding of the researcher's role within the research process. As a result, I decided to conduct a pilot interview with an independent participant who was not included in the final study, to develop confidence and critically reflect on my interview skills before undertaking the formal data collection. During this pilot, I became increasingly conscious of the risk of asking leading or overly closed questions when prompting the participant. In response, I initially avoided prompting altogether; however, this created a conflict between maintaining neutrality and eliciting sufficiently rich data (Brinkmann, 2022). The pilot also highlighted the challenges associated with established relationships. In one example, I had prior familiarity with an incident discussed by the participant, which reduced the extent to which I encouraged them to fully articulate the experience. During transcription, this limited the richness and clarity of the data; shared understanding was assumed rather than explicitly communicated. In future interviews, I recognised the importance of explicitly prompting participants to describe such experiences for the purpose of the recording, even where prior knowledge existed. This reflects Brinkmann (2022) who argues that interview questions must generate material appropriate for later analysis; in practice, I found summary and clarification prompts particularly useful, such as repeating participants' accounts back to check accuracy, which often encouraged them to elaborate further.

I found this transition from quantitative to qualitative researcher somewhat unnatural; this heightened self-consciousness occasionally made the interview interactions feel less fluid, as I was consciously monitoring my questioning style, responses, and potential influence on participants. While this presented a personal challenge, it also highlighted the active and interpretive role of the researcher within qualitative inquiry, reinforcing that reflexivity is not an automatic process but one that requires continual, conscious engagement (Finlay, 2002). In my reflexive journal, I noted that I had adapted my language depending on the instructor I was questioning, drawing on how I would typically interact with them in our established relationship to facilitate a natural, comfortable interview environment. I was mindful that adapting my language could introduce inconsistencies if not considered carefully (Brinkmann, 2022), and therefore used my interview guide as an anchor to ensure that the underlying meaning and purpose of the questions remained consistent across all interviews. The data generated through the interviews addressed comparable areas of experience and produced coherent patterns, suggesting that this balance between flexibility and consistency was largely achieved (Patton, 2002).

Engaging with data protection requirements was also a development for me, as my prior academic research experience predated the *Data Protection Act* 2018. This required a more deliberate approach to data minimisation and secure storage. In addition, as part of the informed consent process, all of my participants requested access to their transcripts and the final results of the study; as a result, I felt a heightened responsibility to represent their accounts accurately and respectfully. This was intensified by my existing professional relationships with them, as I was aware that they may recognise themselves in the findings even where anonymisation had been applied, due to the small-scale context of the study. However, this highlighted a wider ethical learning point: while my relationship with participants made the responsibility for fair representation more visible, this responsibility should apply equally to all future participants, whether known to me or not (Floyd and Arthur, 2012; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). This experience therefore deepened my understanding of ethical research as an ongoing relational responsibility, rather than a process limited to consent and anonymisation.

The most demanding process throughout this study for me however, was conducting the reflexive thematic data analysis. Coding did not involve simply sorting data into obvious categories; it required continual interpretive judgement about which patterns were

meaningful in relation to the research question. During early analysis, several provisional codes appeared significant to me, but did not ultimately develop into themes or subsequent findings because they lacked relevance across the entire dataset. This was initially frustrating, as I felt that some individual examples were really profound for contributing to the research question, and I wanted to make these early ideas ‘fit’ somewhere within the final analysis. However, this became an important reflexive learning point: not every interesting code warranted development into a theme, simply because it seemed to align with my expectations. Instead, I had to accept that theme development was iterative and selective, and that removing and reworking early themes was part of producing more trustworthy findings. This helped me recognise that qualitative analysis involves not only identifying patterns, but critically judging which interpretations are sufficiently grounded and meaningful (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Initially, I worried that my role in selecting and prioritising themes meant that the analysis was ‘biased’. However, engaging with reflexive thematic analysis helped me reframe this concern, although again, this felt like an unnatural process for me. Rather than asking whether I could remove myself from the analysis, I began asking whether my interpretations were sufficiently grounded in the data and transparently linked to the research question. My decision to present one particular finding as significant may have reflected my own professional philosophy as much as the salience of the theme within the dataset: “moments of ‘increased risk’ were recalled by participants as standout experiences”. While this influence does not invalidate the finding, it does demonstrate that reflexivity did not remove subjectivity; rather, it made visible how my values shaped theme construction. This aligns with reflexive qualitative approaches, which position researcher subjectivity as an inevitable and productive part of knowledge construction when critically examined (Willig, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Further, I decided to support the discussion of this particular finding through the metaphor of ‘pushing the boat out’. This was informed by Patton’s (2002) argument that metaphors and analogies can be powerful ways of connecting readers with qualitative findings. However, while this may have captured participants’ positive recollections of increased risk, it may not have fully communicated the distinction between reckless risk-taking and purposeful, pedagogically managed challenge. Instructors’ accounts were not celebrating risk for its own sake, but describing moments where challenge was deliberately judged, controlled, and adapted to their group. On reflection, this

highlighted a limitation of concise qualitative reporting: evocative language can amplify a finding while reducing the nuance needed to interpret it responsibly.

I found it challenging to represent the complexity of the data analysis process within the final research poster. I believe that my poster necessarily prioritised the research question and headline findings, but I felt that some of the interpretive work underpinning those findings became less visible. Given the extent to which my professional experiences and values influenced the prioritisation of findings, I perhaps should have dedicated space on my poster to my role as the researcher to make the constructed nature of the analysis more transparent. This is an important consideration for my future research, particularly because poster presentations are a common format for communicating research within outdoor education. I need to consider how to communicate qualitative methodological transparency more effectively within limited space, such as including a brief statement on reflexivity or researcher positionality.

Summary

This research process has profoundly impacted how I understand my role as a researcher within the field of outdoor education. Exploring qualitative inquiry has required me to accept that this research approach requires recognising, questioning and making transparent how researcher values shape studies. This was a particularly important reflection for me, as this study was closely connected to my own professional challenges I was navigating during the research project's timeframe. The qualitative, interpretivist paradigm I feel was appropriate for exploring how instructors made meaning of risk, but it also required me to confront the personal challenge of no longer treating subjectivity as something to eliminate when attempting to answer a research question. Instead, I have learned to regard reflexivity as a necessary part of producing trustworthy qualitative findings.

This represented a significant shift from my previous quantitative background. At times, I found the openness of qualitative research uncomfortable, particularly during data analysis, where theme development and subsequent findings could not be justified through measurement alone. I now recognise that the issue was not whether I could remove myself from the research, but whether I could ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the data. Maintaining a reflexive journal helped me recognise that reflexivity is not a single stage of research, but an ongoing responsibility throughout design, data collection, analysis

and reporting. In future research, I would consider a mixed-methods approach to combine qualitative depth with broader comparative quantitative data. This could explore wider patterns in instructors' risk perception while retaining interviews to examine contextual reasoning behind those patterns. This would also encourage me to continue to develop confidence across different research paradigms.

This process has highlighted that outdoor education and research share similar responsibilities. Both require judgement in complex and unpredictable contexts, an awareness of power and risk, and a willingness to reflect critically on one's own assumptions. My future practice will therefore be informed by a more careful awareness of how evidence is constructed and communicated. Overall, this experience has encouraged me to approach research in the same way that I approach outdoor education: with greater criticality, recognising that both are shaped by experience, values, context and responsibility.

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