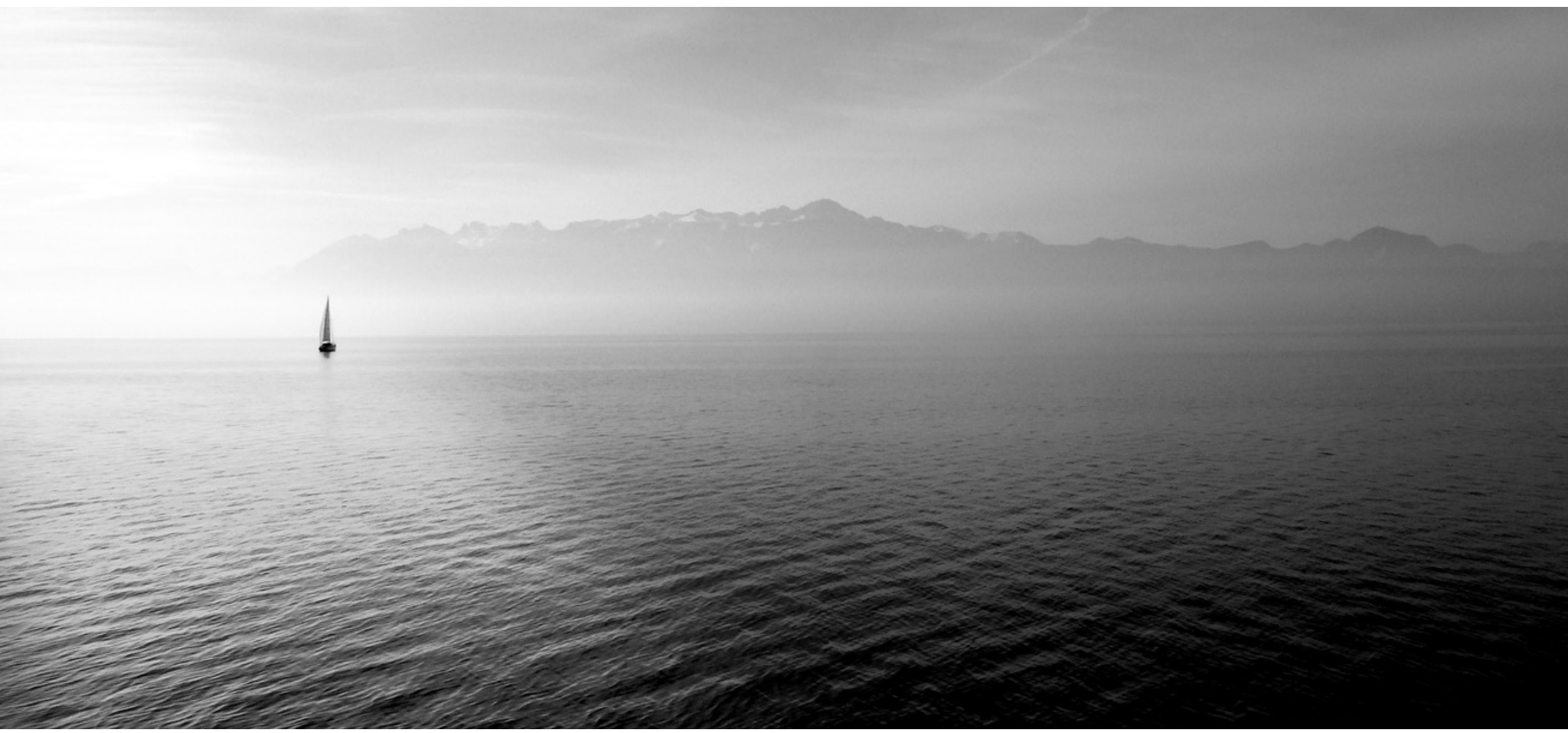
RESEARCH MATTERS

Reflecting on a practitioner's journey to becoming a practitioner-researcher



Have you ever thought about the impact you have on those around you, your clients or participants, immediate colleagues and other Outdoor practitioners? I did and it motivated me to embark on a journey researching what I did, how I did it and the difference it made; a journey engaging with and going beyond reflective practice.

I reflect here on my journey as a volunteer sail training practitioner becoming a practitioner-researcher and academic in educational research. I describe the development of my practice and engagement with research, which I relate to the current landscape for professional development and the Outdoor Learning (OL) Research Hubs project. My experiences and development as a sail trainer inspired me to research voyage processes as a practitioner-researcher. This informs my current academic work in a small-scale study supporting sail training practitioners as researchers.

In 2012, as a recreational sailor with no prior experience of sail training (as a type of Outdoor Learning) or youth work, I volunteered with the Ocean Youth Trust North (OYTN), a sail training charity, as a trainee Watch Leader aboard their 70 foot ocean-going ketch, the James Cook. I would become involved in supporting non-sailing activity (e.g., safeguarding) and, in 2017, was appointed as a trustee. In my first season sailing with OYTN, I was the grateful beneficiary of experienced OYTN full-time and volunteer sail trainers and the young crews with whom I sailed. I was struck by the observable change in young crew members, transforming many from timid, individualistic landlubbers to active, enthusiastic members of a crew-at-sea. I also recognised positive changes in my own sense of self and wellbeing as I became a sail trainer and member of the OYTN community.

I embarked on on-the-job competency-based training in 'hard' technical sailing skills and developed my knowledge of things such as current best practice, policies and codes of practice, and environmental awareness, whilst practising my repertoire of 'soft' or social skills. Full-time sea-staff require commercially endorsed seafaring qualifications, but many volunteers will access Royal Yachting Association (RYA) accreditation via their organisation, often at no, or subsidised, cost. OYTN supported me in achieving RYA certification (including, for example, Watch Leader, Powerboat Handling and Marine Radio). In the UK, the Association of Sail Training Organisations (ASTO, the umbrella organisation for sail training providers) facilitates training opportunities and access to funding, for example international exchanges and Trinity House bursaries, for all sail trainers (1). This initial training was not the final destination, rather it was, in common with other areas of Outdoor Learning, the entry point towards developing as a professional practitioner (2) and further practical experience and learning was required. I also learned, perhaps more importantly, to appreciate sail training as an effective approach to personal and social development for all involved, sea-staff and crew alike.

The adage 'practice makes perfect' has, historically, influenced the design of many skills-based programmes. However, it can take up

to 10,000 hours to master a skill (think of musicians, chess masters or elite sports (3)) and this often requires further learning complemented by coaching or mentoring support. OL practitioners, especially volunteers, do not have the luxury of time to practise; I found that some technical sailing skills faded between voyages and during seasonal breaks requiring a refresh at the start of each voyage or season. We must, therefore, employ a more efficient model to develop our repertoire of skills; personal and social skills are maintained and developed in our everyday lives but through application, practice, and reflection we journey towards becoming a professional practitioner (4).

Reflection and being a reflective practitioner (5) is how we refine our practice; it is how we develop best practice and from where next practice emerges, which might then become the best practice of the future (3). Reflection will be found in many of the outdoor experiences and activities created for your participants using variations of a Plan-Do-Review model. There are two dimensions to reflective practice:

> *Reflection-in-action is the hawk in the mind constantly circling, watching and advising on practice. Reflection-upon-action is considering events afterwards.* (6, p.33)
>
> *Reflecting-upon-practice is something we can do alone, with colleagues or anyone interested in what we d*o." (4)

An example from my own reflective practice is my approach to helming, the 'hard' skill of steering the boat which creates an authentic social interaction for the helmsperson and the Watch Leader (or person supervising the activity, see image one). Helming is just one component in the complex mix of voyage-based activities and is often cited as a positive experience by young crew in their end-of-voyage feedback. Through reflection-upon-action I realised that my largely instructional approach to helming interrupted the young helmsperson's 'hawk-in-the-mind', their reflection-in-action, as they concentrated on steering the boat. With some trial-and-error, in my reflection-in-action, I have developed a more facilitative approach by signposting the boat's visual and audible cues to the novice helmsperson, such as the angle of heel, the bow moving across the horizon and its relationship to landmarks, or changes in wind-noise. It was an epiphany to realise that this approach (i.e. using less verbal instruction and recruiting these non-verbal cues) allowed for a more powerful rapport with the young helmsperson and which impacted the social dimensions of the voyage (7). I have since shared this experience with sail training colleagues to stimulate further reflection-upon-action and wider discussion; mirroring the type of reflection-upon-practice often featured in the pages of *Horizons* (8).

The change I witnessed in many young crew members during their voyage sparked my curiosity about how change might occur. For the curious practitioner, as a 'consumer of research', reading is a staple in (re-)constructing understanding towards greater knowledgeability; however, ready access to free or open-source research reports and journal articles is often problematic. I bought books, new and used, on sail training (there are not too many of these!), outdoor and adventure and experiential learning, but I needed to read more. An

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IMAGE ONE: At the helm

introduction to a leading OL practitioner and academic at the University of Cumbria, found me joining the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL), accessing *Horizons* and subscribing to the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* (JAEOL) to give further scope to my reading across all types of Outdoor Adventure Education. My appetite for research took me beyond the reflective practitioner, as I contemplated a systematic self-critical inquiry founded in sustained curiosity and the desire to learn and understand (9).

Systematic self-critical approaches to inquiry, such as practitioner inquiry or action research, explore the here-and-now learning from experience and its application to real-world practice (10; 11). These approaches are centred on the practitioner's perspective and bring complexity and potential for bias. We see things as insiders whereas non-practitioners may adopt an outsider's perspective. The academic debates on the value, benefits and disadvantages of insider and outsider perspectives, and how bias might influence, and impact research findings and their interpretation, continue to rage. However, I agree with Lawrence Stenhouse's position: that both insiders and outsiders come with conscious and unconscious bias, and that it is through reflective practice and reflexivity we balance these perspectives to recognise and make clear any bias or influence (9). I was comfortable with reflection but reflexivity was a new concept for me, comprising critical reflection and making the familiar, or taken-for-granted, strange so as to question our attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions towards a better understanding of how we relate to others (6; 12). Discussing and sharing our thinking with others, such as colleagues or fellow practitioners, does develop greater understanding of the commonalities in our practice, such as adaptability, creativity and spontaneity (13). It also brings any bias(es) into our critical consciousness; this is a powerful tool in our professional development to (re-)construct our knowledgeability. I am fortunate to have had the time and resources to explore sail training processes from an insider's practitioner perspective. Two studies were from a participant's perspective (14). Each study, supervised by an experienced OL or educational academic and meeting university protocols (i.e. project and ethical approvals), engaged my reflective practice (as both a sail trainer and researcher) and reflexivity to challenge further my thinking and approaches to research design, methodology, data collection and analysis, and how I would share my findings. My latest academic small-scale study has supported sea and shore-based sail trainers to engage with research and explore their own situation. Early findings suggest that such training motivates and increases confidence for those wanting to conduct their own 'systematic self-critical inquiry' (9), but that this is often limited by time, resources (often financial) and the competing demands of the Outdoor practitioner's day job.

Embarking on an academic course of study to guide your research is not an option for everyone. However, there are emerging opportunities for practitioners to access support and engage with and conduct Outdoor studies, such as the IOL's professional development framework and recognition (2), and the Outdoor Learning Research Hubs. Through the research hubs a regional network of practitioners and academics collaborate to enhance the quality of practice, deepen understanding of educational and Outdoor Learning approaches, support reflective practitioners and integrate smaller scale studies into the wider evidence base (15).

This was my journey so far; the motivations, the opportunities and challenges, the support and the prevailing conditions at each stage of this journey have manifested in destinations and waypoints which were unique to me, and the course I was steering. If you have ever thought about what you do as an Outdoor practitioner and the impact you have, then I would encourage you to do the reconnaissance and plan your own voyage of discovery ■

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AUTHOR

Eric Fletcher, Research Associate in the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University.

Eric believes that every day is a school day and you are never too old to learn. He is a co-coordinator of the N.E. Outdoor Learning Research Hub and a volunteer and trustee with the Ocean Youth Trust North.