

Old dogs, new shed tricks: An exploration of innovative, workshop-based learning practice in Australia

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Abstract

Our paper explores some recent innovations in workshop-based learning practice that come out of community-based men's sheds in Australia. It deliberately goes beyond an exploration of the 'typical' community-based men's shed, already explored in our recent NCVER research report and looks at some new and productive interactions between sheds and other informal learning organisations. We go to the margins of rapidly evolving shed practice and single out three types of shed-based organisations that work with school resisters, Vietnam Veterans and older men in aged care. Our aim is to illustrate, using new Australian narrative data, some theoretical and practical implications and benefits of reciprocal, workshop-based mentoring relationships involving men of different ages. Our focus is on ways in which men with a skill or trade are able, in a situated and authentic learning context, to informally 'weave magic' for and with other men, and in some cases with young people. Our paper provides pointers to some of the principles underpinning successful informal and community-based learning practice for older men: particularly the need for a high level of engagement; the choice of an appropriate and safe setting; and to account for the differences associated with age and gender. We articulate an imperative for 'bringing more blokes' into all forms of learning in Australia including through more informal, community-based learning as well as through adult and community education. Our paper and its conclusions have implications for other workshop and shed-based learning practice in vocational education and training as well as informal and community-based learning by volunteers in the quintessential and ubiquitous Australian fire and football sheds.

Introduction

Men's sheds in community contexts are a relatively new, loosely coupled and poorly known set of community-based, grass-roots organisations. These informal, workshop-based spaces and programs in community settings have grown recently and proliferated rapidly across southern Australia. These shed-based organisations have been extensively investigated by Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson (2007) by survey and interview. Unlike personal, 'backyard' sheds, community-based sheds were found in our research to be available to groups of older men and typically auspiced through existing community organisations. They usually provide a group workshop space, tools and equipment and an adjacent social area in a public, shed-type setting for older men. Most are wood workshops but some include a metalwork area and an adjacent garden. Our research focused particularly on ways in which the nature and organisation of these sheds impacts on the informal learning experiences, wellbeing and lives of the mainly older men who use them. While some shed organisations are called 'community sheds' to include women and avoid perceptions of gender bias, our previous research has demonstrated that these workshops cater very effectively for the mainly non-vocational

social, health, wellbeing and learning needs of a very diverse group of mainly older men. We concluded that their main benefit is that they positively and informally address the specific, often acute, needs of a diverse and otherwise difficult-to-reach group of older and sometimes isolated men. These men are typically experiencing complex and difficult changes and stages in their working lives, their identity as aged persons, their physical and mental health, as well as their relationships and identities as men.

Research method and survey findings

Data were collected by on-site interview and survey (N=211) from a sample of 24 of approximately 125 men's sheds in five Australian States open in 2006. Our survey (response rate 70.6%) showed that half of the men who participated were over 65 years of age. Most had relatively limited formal school and post-school education and training backgrounds typical of older men. Four out of ten were former qualified tradesmen. Most were recently retired or involuntarily withdrawn from the paid workforce. One in five were war (mainly Vietnam) veterans. Around one in five were unable to obtain paid work, though expected to do so. Three quarters were on some type of pension. Around six out of ten men currently lived with their wife or partner and typically participated in the shed with the active support and encouragement of their spouse. In the past five years around one half of participants had experienced retirement or a major health crisis and one-quarter had experienced what they self-defined as some form of significant loss. In summary, our research shows that shed-based organisations are attracting a cohort of older men who engage regularly, voluntarily and positively in activities that are positive, enjoyable and therapeutic on a range of levels. Further, it showed that half of the men who use such workshops had no other community affiliation and most were very unlikely to present for formal vocational education and training (VET) or even informal adult and community education (ACE) programs.

In this paper we go beyond describing 'average' or typical community-based men's sheds based on this larger body of survey data and examine new qualitative data including participant narratives from three selected sub-groups of shed organisations that work with young people disengaged from school, Vietnam Veterans and men in residential aged care. Our first purpose is to document particular 'slices' of the diverse and rapidly evolving shed practice in the estimated 150 sheds open in Australia in 2007. Our second purpose is to deconstruct shed practice using narrative to illustrate some new theoretical and practical implications and common benefits of shed-based experiences for these three quite different groups. We have selected these three sub-types of community based sheds because of their ability to illustrate the power of situated learning, not only to engage underemployed and unemployed men of working age, but to engage young school resisters, men sidelined from economic activity by traumatic war experience and men in retirement in aged care

Literature review

Community-based men's shed programs are poorly documented in the literature though best known informally in men's health circles. They have not previously been examined as sites for learning, including informal learning, Earle's largely action-based gerontological research in the 1990s made the link between men and sheds. Earle, Earle and Von Mering (1999) challenged community and recreation professionals 'to devise

programs to make sheds more socially inclusive and productive learning centres'. Bettany (2005) has made theoretical and practical connections between the importance of sheds, men with dementia in aged care facilities and the wider international literature in the field of aged care. Bettany has taken up Thomson's (1995) issue of 'shedlessness' in retirement and made links to research by Cohen-Mansfield (2001) whose elderly dementia treatment principles point, by implication, to the likely efficacy of shed activity for older men. Hayes and Williamson (2005) reviewed the rationales for community-based men's sheds and developed draft guidelines for evidence-based, best-practice in Victorian men's sheds. Using a Delphi study of 20 Victorian sheds, Hayes and Williamson (2005, p.10) concluded that, while the purposes were diverse, that overall, 'sheds were deemed to be important as a place or space for *gathering* men together (serving a utility function) and for men to *gather together* (serving a social function).' There have been several small, unpublished studies of participants and programs within particular men's sheds. The rationales, pedagogies, experiences and outcomes of older men in Australian spaces and programs devised for and used primarily by men, including in community organisations, otherwise remained virtually unresearched prior to Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson's (2007) study for NCVET.

Data from interviews

The three subsections that follow use interview data from workshop-type settings to illustrate the nature of shed-based organisations whose participants are mainly school leavers, Vietnam Veterans and in residential aged care. The emphasis in the selected transcripts is on the aims of sheds, how the sheds are configured, who uses them and why, and what they get out of participating.

Shed practice with young people

Interview data from a small number of shed organisations that collaborate with schools to deliberately target young, disengaged early school leavers as shed participants are specifically considered in this part of the paper. The data come from four sheds that actively involve young people as participants in rural Western Australia and Victoria as well as peri-urban Hobart and Adelaide. These four sheds are singled out because of the considerable evidence in the data showing success with the young people that they target. In each case men with trade-based expertise in wood have independently identified a common need for alternative educational experiences for young people, some including girls, that are practical, regular, hands-on and shed-based. These four shed-based organisations have actively collaborated with schools to identify and involve young people for whom academic and classroom-based pedagogies are not working. The shed-based learning styles that have been found to work typically involve individual or small group mentoring by carefully selected, mature and skilled former tradesmen. The emphasis is on informally developing and encouraging young people's skills and confidence away from a classroom context, with a view in most cases to later reconnect young people with school once their skills and confidence has grown. The age range of young people targeted by these four sheds is diverse: two sheds target boys and girls of primary school age. One of these includes students involved in rural home schooling programs while two other sheds target rural secondary students.

In each case the shed organisations have a small core of older men with trade experience who work with and mentor young people. All work closely with local secondary schools to identify appropriate young people to work with. In each case the shed was ‘grass roots’ in its origins and set up independently of other organisations with little or no reference to any other shed model and without any state precedents. All have become well known and regarded in their own states for their work with young people. As a South Australian coordinator explained, when a small group founded the shed in 1999, they were unaware of any other sheds, “Nowhere, not a shed in sight. Never heard of it, it came from nowhere, it just came from our own head.” In one Victorian shed the targeted group were a mixed group of boys and girls age 16 or 17 years who, as the shed coordinator put it, had a “lot of issues” at school and/or home. Unlike in other states, the school resister group formed only one part of the shed’s participants. They “wouldn’t go to school” but were required to attend “because they couldn’t get the dole”. In this instance they worked in the shed and the garden alongside and with older men doing their own projects which formed part of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

The Tasmanian shed had started for a small group of older men but the primary focus had shifted to young people as “older guys weren’t really participating.” The term ‘shed’ was incorporated into the organisation name but not the term ‘men’. As the shed coordinator explained, “Kids at risk” were now using the service for three or four days a week from the local high school and had ...

“... turned out to be the making of the place ... and the making of the kids ... Schools that use the service now make a donation towards the shed for allowing their [at] risk youth to come here and [for] kids that aren’t really academic.”

The activity in the Tasmanian shed mostly involved making and fixing things for local people and organisations in the community using materials and tools. The coordinator observed that “When the young people started coming down some of them would say, “This is what I want to do. I’m not interested in schools, and it changed them.” The coordinator read from a letter of thanks from a school that concluded, “Our students in the shed are treated like individuals who are cared for and made feel important. You may not realise just how well you do this, but believe me these relationships are very important.” The shed, donated by the local council was set in a back street close to a new housing estate in outer suburban Hobart. The coordinator described the area as having “... more youth and young people, sole parents ... broken families and no grandparents ... that sort of thing ... than old people.” The workshop-based activity with young people as young as primary school age fell entirely to volunteers including men from “aged care, Vietnam Vets, mental health.” Despite its well publicised success with local young people and the important role it plays for older male volunteer mentors, the biggest difficulty had been funding. As the coordinator pleaded, “What really annoys me [is] that we don’t get ongoing funding, because we bring all these people in and help them out - and you look at all the government departments we work for.”

The South Australian shed was set up in a somewhat similar way to the Tasmanian example above. It again avoided the use of the term ‘men’ in the organisation title and again provided mainly for the specific needs of young school resisters including some

females. The South Australian shed was again staffed by older volunteers with work backgrounds in wood-based trades, some of whom do at least one day of voluntary work to satisfy income support obligations. As one volunteer explained,

“99 per cent of the blokes who are volunteers are actually tradesmen, retired tradesmen or injured tradesmen so they are trying to pass their knowledge on to the kids they are working with or to the people they are working with to get a job. It’s not just a group of blokes sitting around having a good time. We are actually doing something constructive.”

The shed had achieved prominence for its success with young people who included Work for the Dole participants aged in their 20s, some of whom were female, as a means of paying some of the bills. The shed had received support and some funding from the local council and schools but now relied on what the coordinator called “... a charge for services ... We don’t call it funding.” It now designs and manufactures quality wood furniture and equipment for private homes and community organisations. Asked about why it works, one of the volunteers said “I don’t think it matters whether it’s mostly guys or not. It’s the commitment of the whole group to a common aim, that’s what makes it work.” The common aim was explained as helping to ...

“... improve the life of the community. Most of the people we get in here to help have it pretty bloody rough. ... From our life experiences we can help them a little bit and if we can guide them in the right direction ... we are helping them to get confidence to get jobs ... to actually talk to other people. ... It is an ongoing friendly environment and non-threatening, and that’s what they enjoy about coming here.”

Asked why he thought the shed worked so well, the coordinator explained, “The main thing is they are out of school and because we are different, we are not like school teachers”.

The Western Australian rural shed organisation that works with young people started independently around the same time as the South Australian shed in the late 1990s and overlaps with the war veterans’ examples which follow, in that it incorporates RSL (Returned Serviceman’s League) in the organisation title. While its title also included ‘men in sheds’ and the small team of volunteer mentors were mainly male Vietnam veterans, the primary focus of the shed was on young people. The shed started in the backyard of one of the men, has since moved to the local showgrounds and now occupies several sheds. Most of the woodworking tools and materials are donated and the shed works closely with funding and support from the local shire, Department of Veterans Affairs and WA Lotteries Commission. Auspiced by the local RSL and the Education Department, the young people come to the shed to do wood-based activity on one day a week from diverse sources: school resisters from local primary schools and secondary schools and other young people who need mentoring including children who are home schooled. Like the South Australian shed, as a ‘pioneering shed’ working with young people, the organisation faced a range of hurdles that could not be foreseen but that have since been shared with others wanting to set up similar sheds. These particularly included funding, safety, legal liability and organisational structures. Because of their well documented success in Western Australia, the coordinator said that ...

“We have done the hard yards and have had about 50 different Shires and organisations go through our shed and try and emulate it. ... Anybody who comes after us doesn’t have most of the problems that we came up against first because we have solutions to most of them. ... It hasn’t always been easy sailing. You have a small group doing a lot of work. ... We started out naïve ...and the learning curve was very steep. You can’t just operate

machinery and have dust extraction and this and that. You also have to have a safety plan, you have to run people through the safety plan. You have to find out whether people have other sorts of illnesses. We found out that [most] aging people have some sort of respiratory problem.”

The organisers have retained ‘men in sheds’ in the organisation’s title but

“... changed over three years ago to include females ... because there were some [female] kids that obviously needed help. That changed our whole strategy within the Shed. The ladies then came on the committee and then ladies became part of the shed on a normal basis ... because of litigation, insurance purposes and basically covering our own backsides to have ladies when young girls are present.”

Quite apart from the value for the 50 young people who use the shed each week, the shed fulfils an important role keeping Vietnam Veterans active, who as the coordinator noted,

“... might otherwise be seen to be ... sitting on their bums at home in front of the television sets and seemed to have no goals and didn’t believe they had anything to give back to the community. I didn’t believe this of course and wondered if there was something we could do about it.”

Shed practice with war veterans

War experience, particularly experience involving combat, is now known from a range of research to produce a wide range of serious and debilitating after effects quite apart from war injuries, that often extend over a lifetime. These long term psychological and health impacts often affect men’s lives, employability and wellbeing as well as their relationships with families. A growing proportion of all surviving Australian ex service personnel who have war experience are men who served in the war in Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This group of ‘Vietnam Veterans’, many of whom were young conscripts, not only experienced the horrors of that war, but were involved in a conflict that was contentious enough politically for their immediate homecoming to be even more difficult and ambiguous than for the World Wars that preceded it. While most Vietnam veterans in 2007 are younger than the formal age of retirement, a significantly higher proportion than the total population are known to experience serious and ongoing problems with health and paid employment.

One in five shed participants surveyed in our national study of 24 community-based sheds (19.8%: Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson 2007) were returned servicemen. Four shed organisations in that study were organised around and auspiced primarily through Returned Servicemen’s League (RSL) or Vietnam Veterans organisations and specifically targeted war veterans, particularly Vietnam Veterans. A larger number of other shed organisations recognised veterans as a small but important user segment of their shed participants. A number of men’s shed organisations deliberately and specifically included Vietnam Veterans as participants. This section of the paper relies on interview data from two shed-based organisations in South Australia and two in Western Australia (including the one referred to above) that include and involve significant numbers of Vietnam Veterans.

One shed-based organisation in suburban Perth in Western Australia operates out of a private garage. It started very informally from a small group of RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) Vietnam Veterans or 'Vets' as they self describe, meeting informally in the garage shed. The original idea was, as it says on the group's trailer, to collect and repair "Washing machines and bicycles to East Timor and other groups." The group still meets weekly in the same garage, but now some of the tools and equipment are donated by the Department of Veterans Affairs and it gets some sponsorship and donations from a range of other sources for a range of community-based repair projects. One of its recent projects has involved repairing old lawnmowers. Initially attendance was restricted to the 'air force Vets', but it now involves other ex-servicemen.

Another community-based organisation in outer suburban Adelaide provides comprehensive shed-based support and rehabilitation for ex-military personnel, most of whom are again Vietnam Veterans. Incorporating a Victoria Cross (military medal winner) in its name, the organisations' initial aim, according to one of the organisers, was "to get [Veterans] together and help them start a retreat sort of thing" in a rural setting. Its current aim, in a metropolitan setting, is to "get [Veterans] out of their houses and back into the community to form friendships and catch up on things they have missed out on in the past few years." It is located in a tenuously leased area of an ex-military complex that operates independently of government with minimal government support and attracts around 100 people a week including providing meals for 60 to 80 people on a Tuesday. As one of the volunteers said, the organisation survives by "Beg, borrow, pinch or steal. Whatever we can get. Like today down in the kitchen tonight I'm doing a meal and we had a bread cart last night. We've got a sausage sizzle tomorrow ... to help us get funds." The organisation aims to "... try and create an atmosphere that no matter what the people are they can sit down and talk to one another." The difficulties experienced and recounted by veterans from a range of wars in this shed complex were based mainly around post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) but included a wide range of other war and non-war related illnesses and disabilities. As one of the shed organisers explained, many ex-servicemen have got 'War injuries, a lot of them have got brain injuries, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, you name it.' One shed is based specifically around activity and rehabilitation for people with brain injuries. Another shed has a fully equipped wood-based workshop and a third building houses a social area for the Vietnam Veterans Association. Even able bodied veterans, experienced men over age 50 years reported going for jobs and being rejected for being "over the hill" and of less value to employers than 35 year olds. An organiser explained that the main aim of the activities at the shed complex was to "get people together and start talking." The dining area is an important focal point. "It's there so they can all get together and have a good social meal."

Men in the wood workshop in this South Australian shed were typically excluded from the workforce for reasons related to PTSD and were undertaking practical activities to socialise and have a break from difficult situations at home. One man explained that ...

"I come out here purely to get away from the wife at times and give her some space, because when we are together every day we are arguing, fighting, looking like having a divorce. So this gives me the opportunity of building some things, getting some satisfaction

out of life instead of sitting at home and vegetating and occasionally doing things to help other people.”

Another explained that “I come out here for a bit of basic social interaction. I’m very anti-social and come here just to mix with people I understand. ... My wife works still and that’s about the only social contact I’ve got.” A third man who experiences depression explained that he comes there

“...to get that tension out. We have two options with depression. Either I go to Ward 17 and you go there and live in [or I come here]. I personally find after a few hours out here I feel all right ... Were not locked in. The door’s not closed. We can get up and go home whenever we want to. ... You can come out if you want to make something. We have got an old boat out there we are building. A lot of people say it’s only shit but not to the people who are doing it. We all understand that now. We understand that we have different problems and we try and make allowances. ... The big thing out here is comradeship. We can sit down and talk amongst ourselves and go home feeling good.”

Asked about whether the complex is best primarily as a men’s space, most men agreed it was. As one man explained,

“I don’t think that we would be anti having women at the complex, but I do think we do what we consider a man’s job out here and for all the other reasons we would rather it stay that way. [As Vietnam Veterans we] have locked ourselves away for decades ... and it has taken a long time to come out and it’s just coming out gradually.”

The other South Australian shed-based example that involves war veterans is named after a Victoria Cross winner and uses the term ‘Workshop’ rather than shed in its organisational title. The ‘Workshop’ is a shed separate from the fully refurbished adjacent RSL hall in a small town close to Adelaide. That refurbishment includes a dining room, kitchen, exercise area, office and computer area and has been undertaken using the shed resources. Unlike in many other community-based sheds, the workshop was the springboard for something comprehensive and separate, that was oriented to the wider community and always included women and non-veterans. Superficially the complex looked like an ACE provider and like ACE offered a number of programs and services. As the coordinator explained,

“There was never any thought that it would be a men’s shed. ... We have men and women, everyone is welcome. ... At the moment it is difficult for women to do the hands-on, a lot of it is done by tradesmen and the work that was done by the ... younger veterans here is physical hard work. ... If we depended just on veterans to be involved we would be only here one day a week because they are only a small part of the community.”

As in the other South Australian veterans shed, food plays an important social role. A full \$5 lunch every Wednesday has a deliberate social function. As the coordinator explained, the meal and the workshop work “... on the same principle: trying to prevent social isolation, get people together and share their knowledge, which is pretty important, particularly for the older people.” As one workshop participant put it, “[W]e do know that there is an awful lot of fellows sitting at home and turning into vegetables and they really do need to get out here”. The coordinator explained that participants particularly get ...

“... a sense of belonging. Most of them are one person by themselves or they are just sitting there with their partner. ... A lot of them have got a lot of knowledge ... so they pass that knowledge on When you get a group together like that they work as a team and that is all part of the rehabilitation process for veterans.”

Shed practice for men in residential aged care

Most men's sheds in community contexts tend to attract mainly older men as participants. In our survey 47 per cent of respondents were over 65 years of age. Some men's sheds are located within aged care settings and provide modified workshop-based activities for groups of male residents. Others, including the South Australian metropolitan one we use for illustration, has programs adapted specifically for older men with dementia, with a disability and also acquired brain injury. In this particular shed men are taken by bus to the shed one day each week. Using only hand tools, the coordinator had modelled the community shed on what men have traditionally done in their own shed-type settings. As he explained, my father ...

“... spent hours and hours in his shed down the backyard. I don't know what he used to do but he would go down there and that was his domain. So what we have tried to do here is create that atmosphere. [For] those that have gone into units and things like that, the shed is now gone, there is no shed, so we have tried to create that atmosphere here.”

As with the previous examples, the shed program has primarily social and therapeutic aims for its participants. As the coordinator explained,

“Our main agenda is for them to be able to continue the social interaction out there in the community, maintain the community link, because a lot of them now live in retirement units or live on their own or perhaps live with their son or daughter who is their carer, so they lose touch with a lot of people they used to have interaction with.”

A shed volunteer explained that the advantage of being just for men allowed men to

“... interact, it's been an activity that they can take ownership of themselves and it's something that keeps them interested in coming along every week. ... When a man comes into retirement you don't just stop there. There is still something you can contribute to the community in the way of experience. 'Ed' is vision impaired as is 'Dave', but they're both men of experience.”

'Ed', a former wood worker from a residential aged care centre particularly liked “... the smell of the place, the smell of sawdust, of shavings, When you have been working with timber all your life it has a beautiful perfume”. In the aged care centre he suggested ...

“It's boring, you're frustrated, and you're free here. Where I am at the moment there's nearly 100 other people, old women, old men going on with their whining. You can't get out of the place. Myself, I am ensconced there day in day out and it's bloody boring sitting on your arse all day doing nothing. If it wasn't for my eyesight I wouldn't be in Cooee of the bloody place.”

Discussion and conclusion

Our paper provides evidence that 'men of experience' have a lot to offer other men, young people and communities. For men who have learned and worked in sheds and workshops all of their lives, the opportunity to informally socialise with other people while passing on their insights, knowledge and skills in community-based sheds becomes a focal point in their lives. For the disengaged young people, war veterans and men in residential care in the sheds we have examined for this paper, hands-on, shed-based experiences with older men are regarded as positive, therapeutic, educative and transformative. While targeted to different groups, we conclude that men's sheds in community contexts share a common commitment to happiness, health and wellbeing through regular and supervised hands-on activity in group settings. The older men assist

and guide the younger at risk youths, the veterans of war support each other and the older men doing unpaid craft provide insight into the social connections and scaffolding that is provided by active and skilled men to one another in a social setting through shared activities. Some psychological theories of adult learning make much of developmental life stages as catalysts for learning. This research illustrates aspects of learning in stages but also shows a broad range of men struggling to construct positive masculine identities. These gendered identities are of great interest and importance to both VET and ACE pedagogy and practice and subject to other research beyond the scope of this brief paper.

Shed-type spaces have the potential to produce high levels of engagement and informal socialisation for people who are socially isolated, and to produce significant individual, family and community benefits. Community-based men's sheds run a variety of informal programs and activities for mostly retired, unemployed or isolated older men, typically through health, aged care, adult education, church, war veterans or local government organisations. While one half of men's sheds have membership criteria, the other half are available to men of any age. Our paper takes its lead from the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks", implying that older people are often so set in their ways that they are unable to learn new ways of doing things. On the contrary, we provide evidence of the potential for shed-based activity to provide an opportunity and context for a wide range of older people to share and teach and mentor others of both similar and different ages, and in the process for all participants to learn many new 'tricks'. The three shed-based sub-groups we have examined are all very difficult to engage in formal vocational education and training and very unlikely to engage in typical adult and community education settings. We conclude that men with a skill or trade are able, in the informal, situated learning context of a shed-based workshop, to informally 'weave magic' with other men and young people. Our paper provides pointers to some of the principles underpinning successful informal and community-based learning practice: particularly the need for a high level of engagement, the choice of an appropriate and safe setting, and accounting for the differences associated with age and also with gender.

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