

A profile of men's sheds in Australia:

Patterns, purposes, profiles and experiences of participants: some implications for ACE and VET about engaging older men

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Abstract

This paper uses literature and survey results to explore several issues associated with the emergence and development of community-based men's sheds in Australia and their relationship to both community and further education and the training system. It develops a series of questions about these developments and their relationship to the development of men as learners as well as the nature of education and voluntary organisations. The confirms for the first time, using compelling and rigorously collected survey data from participants, the critical value of men's sheds in community settings in Australia to older men's well being: particularly to their health, social enjoyment, ongoing learning capacity and ability to contribute to the community. The sheds, relatively recently created, now provide a valuable and critically important place for a wide range of mainly older men within safe, supervised settings in where approximately 150 such sheds are now found in southern Australia. They allow men to regularly meet and happily socialise, mainly with other men with tools, in a safe, familiar, shared workspace in a wide range of communities, situations and organisational types. The men who use men's sheds respond positively to environments that allow them to feel at home and learn by doing, in practical, group situations with other men. This paper confirms the high potential of men's sheds, if carefully configured and managed, to include and support men experiencing issues associated with retirement, health, social isolation, aging and significant change.

Introduction

The current research is deliberately directed to the informal learning function of older men's (mainly but not restricted to men over 45 years) learning programs and spaces in community settings that are usually called 'men's sheds'. They appear to have proliferated and diversified from both the professional impact of Earle's research in the 1990s and through 'grass roots' popularization in Australia by Thomson (1995) and ABC (1996), Hopkins (1999) in New Zealand and Thorburn (2002) in the UK. Men's and community sheds, directed particularly at the needs of older men, have now proliferated to all States and the ACT in various forms. While they are now common and well established in many southern Australian suburbs and towns they have a low profile and are barely recognized beyond shed participants or families. While the oldest sheds accessible to community members appear to have started in Broken Hill around the mid-1970s they do not enter the literature until the mid-1990s.

The new data referred to throughout the paper comes from analysis of a November 2005 survey to participants (N= 154; response rate 68 per cent) in 22 Victorian men's sheds

accessible to men in community settings (Golding and Harvey 2006). This survey comprehensively explored men's experiences associated with participation in these men's sheds as well as their perceptions and experiences of learning within and beyond them. It forms the first part of an in progress research project for NCVER by Golding, Harvey, Brown, Foley, and Gleeson (in progress 2006) examining learning spaces and programs in 24 men's sheds in diverse community settings all Australian southern States where significant numbers of such sheds are located by means of survey and on-site interview.

In the process of identifying learning spaces that would or should form the basis of the national study researchers came across a number of Australian voluntary organizations that pre-date men's sheds in name. These organisations appear to have played (and in some communities continue to play) a somewhat similar and locally important role for older men and communities. These organizations include but are not restricted to railway, engine, car, motor bike, mining, forestry and farm machinery preservation societies as well as woodworking and wood turning guilds. Such organizations have typically served communities - by simultaneously preserving and maintaining men's trades, tools, crafts and artifacts, creating a workshop space for former tradesmen and younger enthusiasts to meet and enhancing community assets and infrastructure including museums. Though primarily serving older trade, mechanic and craftsmen's needs and typically including a work shed, these earlier spaces and organisations differ in important aspects from current day 'men's sheds' in community contexts. They were not specifically badged as 'sheds' or as being for men, and were focussed on a specific craft or trade-related activity rather than on a generic shed space. Though a definitive Australian history of men's learning spaces and the origins of what are currently called 'men's sheds' has yet to be written, there is evidence that some long running sheds – now called men's sheds - originated from these earlier craft and trade-based organizations.

In several senses volunteer-based country fire and emergency services organizations (Hayes, Golding and Harvey 2004) as well as football clubs (Golding, Harvey and Echter 2005) have served - and continue to serve a similar important role, mainly for men and their communities, typically based around regular meeting and activity in fire sheds or football sheds respectively. It is also arguable that trade-based workshops – such as those associated with technical and further education in Australia, including engineering, automotive, plumbing, carpentry share some pedagogical characteristics of men's sheds. By virtue of their periodic, group-based, hands on, workshop and shed-based instructional modes and associated mentoring through an extended apprenticeship system, trade workshops (with the exception of hairdressing and hospitality) have functioned very effectively as training, learning and socialization spaces mainly for tradesmen.

Literature review

Men's sheds and their benefits are poorly known academically but relatively better-known in Australian men's health circles. They have not previously been examined as sites for learning, including informal learning. Earle, Earle and Von Mering (1999) challenged community and recreation professionals 'to devise programs to make sheds

more socially inclusive and productive learning centres'. They have proliferated very recently in southern Australia in the virtual absence of critical research and evaluation as to the value of these spaces or programs and the extent to which they provide pathways to older men back to learning, work and engagement with community. In January 2006 there were around 100 active sheds in Australia and approximately 50 in the process of opening.

Earle's gerontological research in the 1990s made the link in South Australia between aged care, men and sheds. Bettany's recent research and practice, also in South Australia identified the particular importance of sheds for men with dementia (Bettany 2005). Bettany has coined the idea and raised the issue of 'shedlessness' in retirement and identified the efficacy of shed activity for older men. Hayes and Williamson (2005) have undertaken the most comprehensive previous review of the literature including the rationales for community-based men's sheds in order to develop draft guidelines for evidence-based, best practice in Victorian men's sheds. Though the study and review was comprehensive of active Victorian sheds, its emphasis – consistent with the underpinning rationales for many of the organizations that support sheds, was more on the health, well being and social benefits of sheds for men. As a consequence there was little consideration of the nature of the informal learning and skill acquisition presumably taking place, other than as a mechanism of social connectedness. Using a Delphi study of 20 Victorian sheds, they concluded (p.10) that, while the purposes were diverse, that overall

...sheds were deemed to be an important as a place or space for *gathering* men together (serving a utility function) and for men to *gather together* (serving a social function). They concluded that of the sheds examined, most were developed relatively recently (most since 1999), catered for older men (age 50+) and around three quarters do wood work specifically. The study sensed a 'growing awareness ... that many men are left without a space or place to safely meet in Victoria today' (p.10).

There have been several small studies of participants and programs within single men's sheds. CHB (2001) evaluated the Bendigo Men's shed in 1999 using a community health promotion tool (PRECEDE) developed in the US by Green and Kreuter (1991). Jones and Richards (2003) undertook a participant study of the Gisborne men's shed. Hayes and Williamson (2005, p.7) note that the Darebin Men's Shed was 'evaluated by use of the QIPPPS online software system supported by the Department of Human Service (VDHS) and Australian Institute of Primary Care (AIPC) at La Trobe University'.

Findings and discussion: locating research into men's sheds in a wider context

The current research is considered timely, in the light of recent extensive research into the barriers to men's lack of participation in formal learning in the UK (McGivney 1999a; 2004), the critical importance of community-based informal learning in widening participation in excluded communities of people who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged (McGivney 1999b, p.78) and the emerging Australian literature on boys literacy and schooling (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear 2002).

The rationales, pedagogies, experiences and outcomes of older men in Australian spaces and programs devised for and used primarily by men –including in community contexts remains virtually unresearched. Voluntary community organizations with a significant proportion of older male participants such as those devoted to rural and remote public safety (Hayes, Golding and Harvey 2004) as well as football clubs, senior citizens and land care organizations have been shown, through recent rigorous research (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005) to be critically important sites for re-engaging older men in learning both formally and informally – with significant benefits to their lives, work, family and communities.

McGivney (2006, p.92 in press) emphasizes the need for funding that allows for what she calls ‘the essential first stage development work ... engaging with people in the community, winning their trust, listening to them’ in order to increase the quality of engagement with reluctant learner groups. As McGivney (2006, p.94) notes, ‘To engage in organised learning is completely outside some groups’ cultural frame of reference’. As McGivney (pp.94-95) identifies for reluctant formal learners generally, to engage older men

... is neither an easy nor short-term task’ because of ‘the psychological risks (of possible failure or ridicule); the social risks (of acting contrary to family or cultural norms) and financial risks (endangering welfare benefits or getting into debt) where there are no guaranteed (employment or fiscal) returns from learning.

Previous research has identified a range of factors that pose barriers to older men’s attitudes to learning, particularly McGivney (2004), Foskey and Avery (2003) and Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005). This research confirms the already known barriers to learning for many older men: the lasting impact of negative school experiences, fear of failure, negative attitudes to formal post-compulsory education, the importance of work to male identity, particularly for men involved in rural occupations (Foskey and Avery 2003, p.2) such as mining, forestry and agriculture (and the deliberate avoidance of many forms of formal learning), resistance to change, lack of social capital, skepticism about the benefits of learning and practical and structural obstacles including the formality of VET and comprehensively feminized nature of ACE learning spaces (Golding and Rogers 2002).

Men’s sheds, personal territories and male identity

While there are few serious academic texts about men’s sheds that are publicly accessible to men in the community, there are several books and articles in the Australian popular press about men’s personal workplaces or ‘sheds’. All appear to have been preceded by a *Men and their sheds* film (ABC 1996) that was shown and seen on television and clearly remembered by many older Australians. The film ‘researched across four States ... sets out to discover the reasons for very private pursuits of “shedophiles”, why they need their own and exactly what they think inside those corrugated walls’.

Thompson (2002) in his *Blokes and sheds* book identifies the shed as having an important place in Australian culture and mythology. The book’s blurb suggests that ‘An Aussie man’s pride can be measured by his shed – it’s size, what he stores in it and what he can

fix in it'. Thorburn (2002) and Hopkins (1999) write in a similar, folksy style for UK and New Zealand audiences respectively. Thorburn (2002) suggests in the blurb for his *Men and sheds* book that 'a shed is to a man what a handbag is to a woman – both contain all the essentials for surviving in the modern world ... no reasonable woman would dream of putting a foot in men's shed'.

Locating men's sheds in relation to gender theory

Research to investigate men's learning needs in and through sheds designed specifically for men might be regarded by some feminists as problematic in gender equity terms. Gender equity has come to invariably mean establishing equity for *women* in education and work. That women clearly outnumber men as learners in adult and community learning organisations (Golding, Davies and Volkoff 2001, p.68) has widely been considered normal and unproblematic. ACFEB (1996) noted a decade ago that 'Women have constituted 75 per cent of Australian adult education participants for the past 75 years or more but this has received very little strategic focus in research policy or planning within the adult education field.' Adult and community education (ACE) has a strong feminist history and has very successfully and deliberately positioned itself as a sector of choice in adult education for many women. Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001, p.68) noted in their comprehensive review of Australian ACE research that literature on ACE 'is generally underpinned and informed by women's and feminist perspectives.'

The current research tries to take what male researchers Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.4) describe as a 'pro-feminist' position, which, as they acknowledge, is 'a position easier to describe than practise'. This position '... sees the need to change men and masculinities, as well as masculinist social structures, while recognising the hidden injuries of gender for many men. To paraphrase Lingard and Douglas, though the authors reject the idea of 'a turning away from a concern' with the education of women, (p.4) they do suggest the need for '... more equal gender relations that requires, *inter alia*, a policy and practice focus in education' (p.5) for both men and women. A pro-feminist position is particularly difficult to sustain if the current research is portrayed by what Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.115) describe as a 'competing victims' syndrome' in relation to male and female educational disadvantage. Similarly, a pro-feminist position would be inconsistent with any over-claims - based on the current study, that all men are disadvantaged (or women are advantaged) by virtue of their statistically low representation (or women's over-representation) in adult learning contexts.

The current research drifts into what Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002, p.5) would describe as 'dangerous or hostile terrain', It sails closest to a feminist storm, the pro-feminist breeze and a competing victims' syndrome by arguing for a place for men's sheds, on solid evidence, that community-based adult education in Australia has tended to become a site of feminising practice and for 'doing' femininity (after Connell 1996 and Lingard and Douglas 1999, p.118), and that men's sheds might be important sites for men doing masculinity.

It is important to note that in much the same way, the Australian vocational education and training sector, TAFE (Technical and Further Education), tended through its culture, practice and pedagogies - until relatively recently - to become a site for masculinised trade practices and 'doing' masculinity. In 2005 Australian adult and community education providers are typically located in 'houses' set up, staffed and maintained mainly by women. The centre décor, the layout, the posters, the program and the opening hours tend to be oriented towards and embrace women and their particular and different needs from a house-type base in somewhat similar ways that sheds position themselves for the specific interests and environments that attract and engage men.

The very act of deliberately researching and theorising to encourage more equity for men in adult learning, health and aged care settings can certainly be portrayed by critics as 'part of the backlash against women, based on notions of men's 'oppression' and pitting the needs of [men] against those of [women]' (after McLean 1996, pp.65-6). Like Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002, p.5), the author takes the view that it is important for academics and service providers to develop skills to navigate and negotiate such tricky terrain. An alternative reading, similar to the approach taken in Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.123) and the one intended here, is that any form of hegemonic femininity or masculinity can be dangerous to both men and women. This paper contends that there should be a more overt recognition of the social construction of gender in learning, health and aged care services and a tolerance and acceptance of different practices of femininity and masculinity if such services are truly committed to gender equity.

It is possible to mount a similarly strong argument, from solid evidence, that women are so prevalent in community and volunteer-based learning, caring and aging contexts precisely because they are so disadvantaged in the workforce, generally less able to find secure, well paid, full time or tenured employment and the training and more interested than men in participating in non-work related learning in their own time. In this reading, men who are employed get preferential access to instrumental vocational learning through their employers, and as McGivney (2004, p.65) suggests in the case of adult learners, '... will lose face and standing with their peers if they depart from the established norms of male behaviour' and unlike 'real' men engage as adults in learning.

From a men's learning angle, McGivney has argued that while men tend to earn, women tend to learn: 'Learning is seen by men as an unacceptable form of vulnerability' (p.68) and 'something that children, retired people or women do.' (p.65). Similarly to Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004, p.36), Bull and Anstey (1995, p.9) found that
... in many rural communities literacy, as it is traditionally defined was seen more as 'women's work'. 'Conversely men generally saw literacy in more functional terms in order to complete tasks or to augment work'.

While feminists acknowledge that men are indeed under-represented in conventionally defined adult and community learning contexts and experience issues with learning and literacy, they are sometimes reluctant to countenance or acknowledge men's and boy's disadvantage. Many share an understandable concern about likely misreading or simplifications of research findings – even of careful, nuanced and well-meaning research

- about men's different patterns of participation in formal and informal learning. There is a concern that research that identifies men's disadvantage might take the focus off funding or support of programs to address women's disadvantage, still experienced by women in terms of participation in - and particularly outcomes from - education and training more broadly. This research, like the House of Representatives (2002, p.61) inquiry into boys, has encountered some reluctance, even within research communities, 'to openly confront the possibility of [men's] under-achievement and disengagement as an issue, perhaps for fear of undermining ongoing support for strategies for [women].'

Feminists particularly counter suggestions of simple sectoral *exclusion* of men from adult education and training, implied in the title of McGivney's (1999) *Excluded Men: men who are missing from education and training* in the UK, but more nuanced on a careful reading of that work. McGivney in fact says that some of the 'missing' men

... are not deliberately avoiding education: they are systematically excluded from it by employers, education institutions and the system governing programmes and welfare benefits for the unemployed. (McGivney 1999, p.70)

To date it has not been possible to prove or conclude that broader structural exclusions for men - identified in UK adult education contexts by McGivney (1992) - apply in the case of all Australian adult learning. The current research allows for some investigation the alternative or parallel possibility identified by McGivney (1999, p.70) that men's reluctance to engage in education and training might be related 'to lack of interest, fear of failure or the embracing of traditional masculine values'. This research is providing evidence of both men's withdrawal to men's spaces (in adult learning, health and aged care spaces and settings) and structural exclusion from women's spaces and settings.

It is possible to argue that men: either because of negative previous experiences of formal education; because the local adult education or TAFE provider doesn't offer anything they want to learn; because they don't feel comfortable learning alongside women in what they regard as female spaces; because the learning styles and pedagogies don't suit them - should simply 'get over it' and go elsewhere to learn. It is certainly possible - in capital and regional cities in Australia - to point to the Australian public vocational education and training sector - TAFE (Technical and Further Education) as an appropriate men's alternative. TAFE has traditionally been regarded as a 'men's place' - with a general focus on vocational training for male dominated trades and with mainly male staff and students, though this profile is also changing.

In this study of men's sheds it is important to identify the role of women - as participants in some sheds but also as shed coordinators and managers. In both Australia and the UK there is a sense of frustration - particularly amongst women - of their inability to reach men through adult education. There is a general recognition, summarised in UK contexts by McGivney (1999, p.69), that since 'adult community education is seen as a service for women [it] consequently has a limited appeal for men', partly because 'they are mostly staffed by women'. As Tett (1994) identified, 'many adult and community education programmes are designed to help women gain new interests and achieve personal goals [and] therefore do not attract men who have a more instrumental attitude to learning.' (McGivney 1999, p.69).

It is important to observe that adult and community education providers in Australia have been subject to government pressure through their diverse and complex State and Federal funding arrangements and Australian competition policy to make programs more instrumental and more vocational. In larger Australian cities and towns ACE providers now have program profiles approaching those of some vocational (TAFE) providers and some attract a significant proportion of men. In New South Wales VET delivered in ACE now accounts for around half of ACE programs and funding.

Adult and community education community in Australia (particularly where it exists as a discrete sector in Victoria and New South Wales) has been frustrated by increasing government insistence that the sector justify its existence by becoming more instrumental, more competitive and more vocational. There has been an unquestioning tendency in both ACE and VET to conflate participation with a simple count of learners formally enrolled in its providers and programs. This research provides evidence, consistent with Hodges' (1998) suggestion, and based in part on Lave and Wenger's (1991, p.35) earlier finding, that rather than being a simple numeric measure, participation by older men in communities of practice, in this case in men's sheds, is essentially

... socially constructed, interwoven with the detailed fabrics of the community of practice and the negotiated processes of membership and participation. In this way, participation is defined as ways of belonging, where belonging is, "... not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constituent element of its content." (p.35) (Hodges 1998, p.8)

Conclusions

The research evidence about men's sheds in community context is limited because the 'movement' is grass roots and men's shed growth and proliferation has been quite recent. Men's sheds are of interest in VET and ACE research because they suggest an alternative conclusion about older men's relatively low participation in formal and non-formal learning that shifts the focus away from men (or women) as the problem. Rather than concluding that older men are not learning because they are not involved in adult education or that there aren't enough men's programs, the findings to date suggest an alternative and more complex conclusion. That is, for a range of reasons, men with negative experiences of formal learning are reluctant to present for more learning – particularly in spaces largely inhabited by people, particularly women, with a passion for learning. In essence, older men generally don't feel like they *belong* in places and spaces dedicated *only* to learning or health, even when it is the only local space for accessing adult learning or health programs and services. The same conclusion might apply to women who don't feel like they belong in a wide range of organisations where men tend to hold sway: over the learning space, the décor, the pedagogy or the programs.

Hodges (1998, p.9) researching in an education context suggests that 'What emerges as crucial, then, is less the "content" of education, and more substantially the quality of the person's participation within this educative community.' What is being offered though VET and ACE and learned by men in those contexts is arguably less valuable than the learning some older men experience through belonging to and participating in surrogate learning organisations like men's sheds as participants and volunteers – particularly with

other men in communities of practice. Learning, through this perspective, as Hodges (1998, p.9) observes, ‘... is an ontological transformation, not an epistemological effect.’ Putting it another way, older men might come to men’s sheds and tend not to use VET or ACE because they tend not to feel like they belong there - or experience a quality of participation in the VET or ACE community of practice as they experience it in some other community contexts. Using a somewhat similar theoretical lens to that used by Hodges (1998, p.8), though hard to countenance for women from a gender equity perspective, it is also possible to argue that this is because participation is organised by female structures of privilege that deny men’s difference and diversity.

The current research raises some important unanswered but tantalising questions: about whether ‘men’s sheds’: recent grass-roots solutions for increasing numbers of older men in communities throughout Australia - are solving or exacerbating the cleft stick that many older men find themselves in as learners - with a desperate need for learning that they are unable to admit to or address. Is the apparently deliberate retreat by some men away from ACE towards community-based sporting, service and emergency service organisations, including men’s sheds normal, natural and unproblematic? Is the ‘male only shed’ a form of the modern day Masonic Lodge? Do men-only learning and community organisations solve or perpetuate men’s isolation and difference? Is it akin to some women retreating to a position of learning strength with other women in the ‘community house’? To what extent are men’s sheds colonised by men who eschew a competing victims’ syndrome? Does an ‘ACE for women and sheds for men’ strategy risk a form of adult education apartheid based on gender? To what extent will the findings of the current study simply confirm real, persistent, ‘natural’ and inter-generational differences in men’s and boy’s preferences for hands-on, practical, outdoor and instrumental learning styles and pedagogies?

Finally, previous findings summarised in this review are important and sobering starting points when attempting to locate the present study - of essentially informal, ‘grass roots’, volunteer run, community based initiatives in one or more of the training, learning, work or health literature. There is the potential for these ‘grass-roots’ developments to be colonised and adopted as ‘programs’ by governments and bureaucracies. There is the question about how the hegemonic principles associated with the instrumental and reductionist notions of training and education can or should be overlain on these very diverse ‘self-directed’ initiatives, even by means of the survey used for this research.

There is therefore the potential, through this and other research, of possible mis-interpretation and disconnection, such as through a top-down, government program ‘roll out’ of men’s sheds programs linked to individual obligations and expectations on the grounds that it might produce efficient and effective fiscal and employment outcomes. In essence, if men’s sheds can be shown to produce health, well being, community and learning benefits informally, how might they be nurtured and supported by governments on the basis of their demonstrated ‘measurable outcomes’ without formally foregrounding the informal benefits to the point that they lose and turn off the participants? If men’s sheds were formally re-badged as older men’s learning and health programs, would they cease to attract men or deliver these desired outcomes?

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