

LEARNING AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW
**A STUDY OF COMMUNITY LEARNING AVAILABILITY & OUTCOMES FOR OLDER MEN
IN AN AUSTRALIAN REGIONAL COMMUNITY**

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This paper uses qualitative interview data about learning by older men (over 50 years) collected in 2009 from nine community-based organisations in a regional city in New South Wales. It sets out to identify the learning experienced and available in community settings, to reflect on how adult and community education (ACE) in Australia might be more broadly defined, understood and valued in ways that is more inclusive of older men. The qualitative data from this study were collected from on-site interviews with older men in diverse community-based organisations including ACE, few of which are dedicated learning organisations. Older men's learning intentions and outcomes from these less formal organisations are shown to be rich, lifelong, lifewide, colourful and complex. Many older men who are experiencing turbulent and difficult times within or beyond their paid working lives tap into and benefit from the many spectra of community learning as a way of staying well, happy, active and connected. It suggests that the Australian adult and community education sector, if more broadly recognized and defined, has important roles other than as vocational outreach for the VET (vocational education and training) sector.

Introduction

Most dedicated education and training organisations in Australia are oriented towards youth, including accredited vocational preparation up-skilling and retraining for paid work. A high proportion of the Australian workforce, around one half, has no post-school qualifications. For most adults in paid work, the majority of their learning, and the maintenance of that learning, tends to be through the workplace, through learning at home or via the internet. While discretionary learning for older adults (age 50+), mainly for interest, pleasure and social connection, has tended to be provided in adult and community education (ACE) short courses, such provision is far from universal in Australia by state and region, and men typically comprise only around one quarter of participants. The focus in this paper is on learning by older men through community-based organisations. It sets out to identify, through participant narratives, what learning is experienced and available in community settings, to reflect on how adult and community education in Australia might be more broadly defined, understood and valued in a way that is more inclusive of older men.

Literature review

Research shows that men tend to invest significant time and effort into paid work and less time in midlife and mid-career into family and community (Gradman 1994). Retirement, particularly forced early retirement between 50 and 65 years, therefore creates a potential crisis for many older men when they retire, as this work-based source of positive identity is removed (Hall, Brown, Gleeson & Zinn 2007). Gradman (1994) showed that older men without access to learning through work, through regular community involvement or through an appropriate, local, adult learning organisation, are at elevated risk of social exclusion. Risk of such social exclusion to older men's wellbeing is elevated if one or more of the following determinants of wellbeing are also limited: literacies, access to information and communications

technologies (ICT), physical mobility or home and family life (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009). Golding (2005) showed that men over 50 years are much less likely than women in the same age cohort to be formally learning. Dedicated learning programs, pedagogies or contexts are rarely pitched specifically to men and very few are oriented to older men. In older age cohorts, most men are also beyond the reach of learning through the workplace. In 2006 approximately one third of all adult men in Australia were not in paid work (Lattimore 2007), a proportion that is predicted by Lattimore to increase to around one half by 2030. Only a small proportion of these men not in work are unemployed or studying full time. Most had either withdrawn from the workforce before retirement age (65 years) or were retired.

Australia has one of the most highly gender-segmented labour forces in the 'developed' world. Much of this gender segmentation is paralleled by patterns of gendered segmentation and participation in community-based activity. While older Australian men (50+) participate as volunteers in community-based organisations at similar rates to older Australian women (ABS 2007, p.17), on average they comprise only around one quarter of all older learners in dedicated learning organisations such as university, TAFE, and adult and community education. When participation data in community organisations are analysed by gender and organisation type, men of all ages are much found to be much more likely than women to participate in sport and recreation organisations, whereas women predominate in human services organisations, including community/welfare, health and parenting/children/youth organisations (ABS 2007, p.7).

Men who participate in community contexts in Australia, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities, tend to be concentrated in fire and emergency service organisations (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004), including surf and coast rescue as well as in some sporting organisations, particularly in football and rugby clubs. Older men have shown a particular attraction to community-based men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007). Men's general preference, in these and other shed-type, workshop-based settings, is for regular, active, social, hands-on, practical involvement, wherever possible 'shoulder to shoulder' and outside. Men are much less likely to be involved in indoor, community settings where the emphasis or the activity is face-to-face. Community settings where men are less likely to be actively involved include those where the emphasis is on welfare, learning, aged care, health or community services. Unsurprisingly, the pedagogies, programs, décor, staff and services in these settings tend to be focused more on women's needs and women's preferences (Macdonald 2005). There have been moves in policy development towards more male-friendly services in recognition with significant problems with older men's health and wellbeing (DHA 2008).

Method and limitations

The regional city of Lismore in northern New South Wales (population in 2006 of 45,000 approx) was chosen as the focus of this research paper for four main reasons. Firstly, the region was large enough to support a diverse range of adult learning and community-based organisations. Secondly, it was located in New South Wales, a state recognized (along with Victoria) by Bardon (2006, p.23) as having 'well developed capabilities across all three tiers' in terms of provider types in the community education sector. Thirdly, the city of Lismore, and the surrounding 'Rainbow' or Northern Rivers region has a significantly higher proportion of older people not in

full-time, paid work. Fourthly, the Lismore interview data were already available from a recent study (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009) of learning by older men in community settings. The method summarised below, as it applies to the Lismore (NSW) site, is fully explained in that three state, six-site study for National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre. While that research included surveys as well as interview data, the current paper is restricted to analysis of the 98 pages of fully transcribed interview data from nine audio-recorded interviews. In total 38 men over 50 years were interviewed on-site and in small groups, in nine Lismore and district organisations during 2009. The interview questions focused on what men do through the community organisation and what learning benefits and outcomes they perceived from participating. Older men (50+) were interviewed as participants in a predetermined set of five community organisation types, enumerated in Table 1 (column 1). The nine organisations included: one adult and community education (ACE) provider, three age-related organisations, one fire or emergency services organisation, one sporting club and three men's special interest organisations. The organisations are listed in the table and introduced in the results section the same order: from dedicated learning organisations (*italicised*) that do have an overt learning function, to organisations that do not.

Table 1 Adult and community organisations in Lismore and interview data available

Organisation Types	Organisations
<i>Regional University</i>	<i>Southern Cross University*</i>
<i>TAFE (Technical & Further Education)</i>	<i>North Coast Institute of TAFE*</i>
1. ACE (Adult & Community Education)	<i>North Coast Community College</i>
2. Age-related	<i>Over 50s Learning Centre; Northern Rivers U3A;</i> Lismore Senior Citizens
3. Fire or emergency services	Lismore City SES (State Emergency Services)
4. Sporting	Lismore Rugby Union Club
5. Men's special interest	Men's & Family Centre; Richmond Valley Woodcrafters; Alstonville Adventist Men's Shed

KEY: Dedicated learning organisations are *italicised*; U3A = University of the Third Age; * No interviews conducted.

There are a number of methodological limitations to this paper. ABS (2007) data show that only around one quarter of older men beyond the paid workforce are involved in community-based organisations similar to those in which this study was conducted. The focus on the relatively rich array of learning choices in this one regional city location, while deliberate, is also unrepresentative. The small sample of men in the nine selected organisations may not be representative of Lismore community organisations or similar community organisations nationally.

Results

Older men's narratives within the Lismore community organisation transcripts were analysed to identify the contexts in which men were learning, as well as to identify the benefits they attributed to their participation. In this section, some older men who participate in Lismore-based organisations are introduced, in same order as in the right column in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure participant confidentiality, consistent with university ethics approvals.

Adult and Community Education organisations

Adult and Community Education is not available in all states or regions of Australia. Where ACE is available there has been a consistent trend towards increased vocationalisation for over a decade. ACE in some cities in New South Wales, including in Lismore, tends to be concentrated in large, well organised and government-supported ‘community colleges’, where programs are oriented towards lifestyle and literacy courses as well as to vocational training and retraining. The slogan of *North Coast Community College* in Lismore is ‘meeting our community’s training needs’. While the men interviewed in this ACE provider in Lismore were either unemployed, semi-retired or retired, their choice of ACE as a learning environment went beyond the purely vocational. Peter, in his 70s, explained that he was seeking a particular computer skill, though the skill was not related to paid work:

When I was in the workforce, [if] I needed help with computing, there was always someone down the corridor or in the building. ... But now that I work from home ... there is no one at home during the day when I want advice [that] can help. I have done [the course] because younger people are *au fait* with computer techniques and methodology generally, but the past generations are not and I wanted to improve my skills in those areas.

Malcolm and Ed were both in their 50s, unemployed, and doing an ACE course as a Centrelink requirement as part of a ‘Work for the Dole’ (unemployment benefit) mutual obligation. Malcolm’s purpose was clearly work-related.

[I was in work] and they basically closed the door. ... I was technically made redundant. [My wife] got cancer so I want to get back to finding a job.

Ed has enrolled in a progression of ‘lifestyle’ courses, and his interest and attraction to learning through ACE was more extended, more complex and lifewide. Ed had:

... done lots of hobby courses. ... About four years ago ... I had an emotional breakdown ... and life changed dramatically for me. I was in a relationship and when that crashed ... my life changed. I want to gain more skills to navigate this particular culture. ... For me, walking in the door to ACE those four years ago has probably helped me to have the courage, and whatever it takes, to actually continue ...

Ed explained that after four years out of the paid workforce with a difficult home and personal life, he was struggling with the culture and lack of identity associated with being unemployed.

How people respond to me is a pretty big part in how I measure how I am getting through the world, because my culture doesn’t recognise what I do.

Ed was attracted by the non-threatening atmosphere created in the ACE provider, and identified his ‘fear of failure of not knowing something’ as “a male bloody thing”.

I would be a failure if I said, “I don’t know something.” ... It would be a failure for the Australian male to say ‘Gee! Someone else might know something’ ... I think that is a big thing. [Men are OK] ... once they get into something and they are doing something, and it’s safe and there are rules set up. I was teaching [in a previous job] and heard people say “I would like to do that” [and someone else would say], “Who put that into their mind? After all, men don’t do that sort of thing.”

As another man in this conversation observed, “Once you get through the door [at ACE], you come back.” Peter summarised the opportunities available for men’s learning through dedicated ACE organisations like North Coast Community College.

[Men] have contacts through ... work, whereas women were probably more homebodies and they would [gain more] techniques and competence in what TAFE was offering than blokes. ... [Unlike ACE], TAFE would be for the more serious.

Age-related organisations

Age-related learning centres like the *Lismore Over 50's Learning Centre* are not common in Australia. The Lismore centre had no premises of its own, few resources and no paid staff. It had no web site and its volunteer managers worked without the regular use of email or mobile phone. This was a truly 'community-owned-and-managed', grassroots organisation run entirely by volunteers. None of its learning was accredited and most of the programs were oriented towards activities and interests for adults beyond paid work. The older men interviewed comprised a small minority of the Learning Centre participants. Harry was retired and had been coming for thirteen years. He recognized the need for him to get out of the house, to maintain friendships and to avoid boredom and depression in retirement.

I had worked in a business of my own for 50 years. Coming close to retirement all sorts of letters were coming with this wonderful retirement plan. ... But nobody ever said, "There is going to be a dramatic change to your life and your lifestyle." ... All of a sudden I was at home, [whereas] before I was at work all day. And I'm taking up my wife's space and she's annoying me and we fought. We had some arguments. ... I basically came along because I was just about to become evicted and my wife thought I should be doing something. ... You do not have to have any academic level to be here. ... You just come along and fit in with ... courses that you feel comfortable with doing. ... I know with depression, boredom and all that sort of business that with the Over 50s there are just so many courses on offer that there is no need for anybody to be bored. There's also the friendship of the people that you meet in the organisation.

Harry summarized "A lot of people, when they reach 50 they are considered scrap heap material."

Hugh still worked part time and came to the Learning Centre mainly for the art and yoga programs. Hugh also recognised the social and wellbeing benefits associated with wider community participation. Hugh was restricted by:

... a back problem. [I] can only do light activities. ... I come here probably mainly to be with people. I am not a great artist ... but I like the company and I do learn. I have learnt a few techniques in drawing, but I am not a natural. The other thing I do is yoga and that's mainly for my physical body to try and keep that mobile.

There was broad agreement amongst the men that the Over 50s Learning Centre was more hands-on, and that U3A Northern Rivers (introduced below) was 'more intellectual' for 'university-type' people. Both organisations were volunteer-run and oriented to the learning and social needs of older adults, mainly women. However there was a marked contrast between the 'low tech' organisation and management style of the Learning Centre and U3As active and extensive use of new information and communications technologies (ICT): including a web site, the internet, an electronic noticeboard, email and mobile phones. These differences were reflective of participants in U3A with more professional working backgrounds and more positive views about formal education.

Steve participated in *U3A (University of the Third Age) Northern Rivers* in Lismore. Steve lived on his own and came to U3A, not for learning, but for social 'polishing'.

When I come into town I find that it's a civilising experience because it is mostly women, and they are more civilised than men. I mix [here] with a lot of couth people ... As a recluse I mix with all these good people ... for a little 'polishing' three times a week. ... I just find it very stimulating. I have a lot of friends in U3A .

U3A was about trying things out informally, as Ted explained.

I like to try things out. The beauty of [U3A] is that it is nothing like TAFE, it's nothing like Uni there's no tests, you're not being judged, and I like to do a bit of both. I like to

be one of the class or teach skills myself, which I get a lot of benefit out of teaching people a few things that otherwise they wouldn't be aware of. It's an easy, low-pressure situation and a great way to pass on your knowledge and the feedback is great.

For Ted, a range of social activities and benefits extended beyond the classes.

I didn't expect the social aspect to be so good. We always manage to have a morning tea or afternoon tea and people will talk about a wine night or dinner at one of the local restaurants. ... People organise trips to a concert or a movie afternoon that is fabulous for people on their own ... So it really does give people an opportunity to fill the whole week with some activities.

Anthony, an office bearer in the *Lismore Senior Citizens Club*, introduced the club activities and what older men do there on the four mornings each week that the club is open. On the day of the interviews, it was indoor bowls day.

We have got a lot of diversity here. ... Some of them ... just play bowls, and that's important. They get away from their own environment and they come in here for a few hours. We have got people that only go on trips. We have people who just come to the meetings and they all seem to get some advantage out of these things. ... We have got a bit of everything going. ... [For most men] it's mainly just [for] the company and the people that you meet.

For Paul, who was a widower, the reason for participating was pretty simple. It was 'here or the pub'.

I come here for (a) the social activities, (b) the exercise, because we have our [health] conditions, which most elderly people do, and this keeps my flexibility rating going. I learn to stay alive basically. ... Being a widower, when you are on your own you have some choices. You can either go to the pub or you can look after yourself.

Gary, who was a carer, got:

... a lot of companionship out of it with cards and bowls. I used to come to the meetings but my wife is not real good and I can't leave her a lot of the time so that handicaps me a bit.

For most men interviewed, Senior Citizens was about companionship, friendship, exercise and getting out.

Fire and emergency service organisations

Fire and emergency service organisations, are a ubiquitous and diverse set of voluntary, community-based organisations across Australia (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004). Like other similar organisations, *Lismore City SES (State Emergency Services)* requires mostly male volunteers to undergo comprehensive and regular accredited, hands-on training. Apart from providing a critically important emergency response, such organisations tend to be important learning sites and venues for regular affiliation for men of all ages, particularly those men with an aversion to formality, and who like learning 'hands on'. Ben, 60 was retired but his wife was still working.

I do enjoy coming along to the [SES] training nights and it meets the need for affiliation. ... It's the need to be with people who have some interest to you and the need for achievement that I probably had in the younger part of my life. Being with [like people with] similar values, similar focus, similar levels of responsibility and similar levels of a way to put something back into the community.

Apart from the pull of the organisation, there is sometimes a push to get out of home in retirement. Malcolm needed ongoing contact with people in retirement.

I had been dealing with young people for years and years and years I needed to have contact with people. ... The first six months when I retired, I can vividly recall my wife ... telling me, when I was at the kitchen table, [that] I had to lift my feet up so that she

could sweep under me. ... I was driving her mad. ... [Here at the SES] I learn organisational skills, perhaps the exercise every week, trying to access the capability of people so that I can delegate jobs to them.

Sam had previously been a bus driver, and now needed something to replace the sense of worth associated with paid work.

When you suddenly stop doing 60 hours a week and start doing nothing, you just sort of lose the sense of worth and purpose, and [SES work] gives me that need.

Sporting organisations

A huge range of sporting organisations in which older men were involved were available in the city of Lismore. The selected organisation was the *Lismore Rugby Union Club*. Participation in sport for older men particularly includes bowls and golf. While most men over 50 are usually beyond playing football (including soccer and rugby) competitively, those who competed when younger often stayed attached to the club though a range of regular, volunteer roles as well as in a parental role. The Lismore Rugby Union Club maintained an active club with around 100 senior players and 200 juniors. Jake undertook a range of club roles in. He explained how he had:

... been involved with rugby virtually all of my life, I played when I was younger, [my son played and I wanted] ... to put something back to the game. I enjoy the atmosphere, I enjoy the people you meet out there and it gives me an interest, gives me something to do. ... There wouldn't be a day that goes by that I am not doing something that is involved in the club.

Carl enjoyed the opportunity in a leadership role to "guide the direction of the club and help haul in others to do a lot of the work." Carl particularly enjoyed:

... the friendships that I have made. Now I wouldn't have known any of these guys without the rugby. ... I have met some wonderful people and met some wonderful friends. ... It's that fraternity. ... You can go anywhere, you wear a rugby tie and you're a rugby man and you are accepted straight away ... That's what I love about it, ...the genuineness and friendships that you make out of it.

Carl had learned a great deal through his involvement, but:

... more by chance than by design. ... I have learnt a lot about ... different people, I like watching the kids growing up, you see them growing into men and how they are changing.

Most of the young people involved as players are young men who are encouraged to learn about and model respect for the club. Carl explained that:

We say to the boys "The players have to respect the club. You're wearing our shirt and playing for Lismore City. You pay your fees and you own the club and it's your club," and they will respect it and they will back each other up.

As another older man summarized, "We call it a family". The typical response about what older men get out of their involvement is neatly summarized by the quote, "It's just a good community, it's good fun and it's something that has been part of my life, and I am happy that its part of my kids life ..."

Men's special interest organisations

Older men were interviewed in three organisations where men comprise all of the participants. They include the Men's and Family Centre in Lismore, as well as two workshop-based organisations on the outskirts of the village of Alstonville: the Richmond Valley Woodcrafters and the Alstonville Adventist Men's Shed. The *Men's and Family Centre* in Lismore, providing programs and services specifically

for men, one of the only such services in Australia. Greg came to the Men's and Family Centre as a volunteer looking for paid work.

There was high unemployment and I couldn't find paid work so I needed to do some volunteer work to fill my time in. ... And because of my separation from my family two years ago, being here has made me realise that I have connections. I am actually connected to everybody.

The key outcome for Greg and other older men interviewed was the ability to communicate and connect with other men. As another man explained, the courses men do at the Centre typically "bring up a whole lot of stuff in your own life". Much of this 'stuff' is personal and confronting for men with diverse issues to do with life, family and relationships. As one participant summarized:

This would be the only place that I have met people where you can actually talk about things that nobody else talks about, so to a degree its unreal. You're anonymous to a degree, but it's companionship. [Even when] people finish the program, they keep coming.

Richmond Valley Woodcrafters is based in a shed in a rural setting 20 minutes out of Lismore and is dedicated to fine woodcraft. Ron explained why he participated:

I enjoy men's company even more than women. ... I have been happily married for 40 years, but I get great fulfilment out of Thursdays, which is my day here, and you go home and you say, "I have had a great day". You have always achieved something, you have always built something or made something or done something creative in the course of the day.

Len had been a professional woodturner since he was fifteen years old. He had been injured in the workplace and still:

... suffered with a lot of nerve pressures from my injuries. I find that when I am up and doing something and my mind is on other activities, I don't have the spasms that I normally would have. ... The more you do, your mind is active so your body seems to work much better. ... I have met some really nice people and I get a lot of satisfaction out of passing on some of my skills to them ... I have got pretty reasonable skills that I can pass on.

Peter summarized the push and pull factors typical of woodcrafters interviewed.

I was going stir crazy because I was just stuck at home. We have got three acres and all I was doing was working on the three acres. So I am getting a lot of social skills out of this and meeting people.

The *Alstonville Adventist Men's Shed* is also in a rural setting and superficially very similar to the nearby Woodcrafters. It also provides regular, hands-on activity in a community setting for older men. The difference is that the emphasis is more on learning about being men beyond the realm of paid work, rather than learning about a trade, a craft skills or creating a fine product. Colin was a former dentist. Now 94, Colin explained that:

I have always used my hands and I have always had hobbies in fine work. I did a lot of woodwork and I have carried these things right through and I can still work ... It has been a great benefit to me and if it hadn't been I would have died ... if it wasn't for the companionship.

Frank, now 74 "left school after three years at high school. I was never educated".

I learnt from the University of Hard Knocks. ... You are never too old to start learning. ... You learn all the time, you listen to what is happening and you keep learning. Being in the Shed here I have learnt techniques. I was never a woodwork sort of guy, but I could drive a nail with a hammer and that's it ... There's the comradeship and friendship. ... I am not very active, so it's great to be able to get out and be amongst

friends and men and its great for the activity. ... It's good to be able to continue to be involved within the community.

Discussion

The older men introduced in the narratives above illustrate the rich diversity of community-based, learning-related experiences available to older men as participants, in nine organisations in five broad organisation categories, in one regional city. They illustrate the significant and interrelated personal wellbeing and community needs and benefits associated with lifewide and lifelong learning and participation. Only one third of the nine organisations have learning as their core business, and only one has to do with vocational preparation. For the emergency service organisation, the accredited training is about readiness for community emergency. For the men's and family centre, the learning is essentially about behaviour change. For the community men's shed, the learning is about men's wellbeing. For senior citizens, sporting and craftworkers organisations, while a hands-on activity is usually at the centre, much of the valuable learning is social, incidental and deliberately informal.

For older men in all of the organisations examined, the learning that is most sought, valued and experienced is not narrow, formal or vocational. What is sought is learning that is social, broad, deep and health-giving or *salutogenic* (Macdonald 2005). The learning and pedagogies are most valuable and appropriate when they meet individual men's needs rather than being delivered 'off the shelf' as industry or vocational competencies. Very few of the learning needs and benefits were vocational, or motivated by a need to re-enter the paid workforce. The narratives highlight the significant value to older men's lives of regular, social activity and opportunities to give back to the community *through* participation. This value is at odds with the current emphasis, in neo-liberal policies, on government support that is restricted to accredited education and training programs for younger adults of working age. This vocational emphasis is understandable for the 40 per cent of the current working population (for men age less than 65 years) that have no formal post-school qualifications (Shah & Burke 2006) who are perceived as being 'in danger of being left behind as skill requirements increase' (Bardon 2006, p.3).

Wherever older men come into contact with adult learning, vocational education and training or 'job market' organisations, there is financial pressure on them to 'take the training' with whatever other services are available, regardless of what men actually want or need to learn in their lives at that time. The mistaken assumption is that all men who are out of work lack the vocational skills to engage in paid work, or the literacies to engage in the necessary training. Ironically for many older men, research from other, diverse sites beyond Lismore (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009) found that it was often a combination of negative experiences of early, formal learning and a lifetime of debilitating work that damaged men and created the aversion to both learning and full time work. The difficulty for many men in this situation is avoiding what Bardon (2006, p.16) describes as 'the diverse tentacles of the VET system'. Men understandably avoid doing training for training's sake. The older men's narratives above illustrate how men deliberately avoid being placed in potentially patronising and demeaning positions, where there is seen to be something wrong or missing with them as learners or as potential workers. By contrast, positive and active engagement in community-based organisations is one way in which older men can avoid the 'VET octopus'. Older men are shown to prefer to engage in learning which is social, regular, and hands-on and with significant wellbeing benefits

embedded within it. Further positioning community education as ‘the outreach arm of the VET sector’ (Bardon 2006, p.6) is, to use another animal analogy, to have the small and young tail wag the big and older dog.

Conclusion

This paper has deliberately examined learning for a very different, generally older (age 50+) cohort of adults, specifically older men who do not fit neatly into existing vocational education and training (VET) or adult and community education (ACE) policy frameworks. Some of these older men are beyond working age; others are only marginally attached to the workforce or withdrawn from it. This gradual, natural and sometimes deliberate withdrawal from paid work for older men is typically motivated by a range of life choices and changes as well as personal and family circumstances. The deliberate decision *not* to engage in full-time, paid work, as the narratives demonstrate, is often pragmatic, socially sensible and economically rational. The paper raises important questions about how adult and community education in Australia might be defined, understood and valued for adults for older men in other contexts in Australia. The paper demonstrates how many older men who are experiencing turbulent and difficult times, towards or beyond the end of their paid working lives in a regional city, tap into the many other spectra of lifewide learning as a way of staying well, happy and active, connected and contributing to the community. The vocational education and training options are understandably less attractive, and in many cases inappropriate and irrelevant to most older men.

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