


Shedding some preconceptions about men's learning



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Intentions

- Provide an overview & implications of what new research says about men's learning.
- Identify ways in which the research might inform practice within (& beyond) adult and community education.
- Explore some of the interplay between older men's community involvement, informal learning, skill development, employability, health & well being.



The suite of Victorian research

- *Adult & community learning in small & remote Victorian communities.* (Golding & Rogers 2002)
- *Men's learning through ACE & community involvement in small & remote towns.* (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2004)
- *Results from a survey of men's sheds participants in Victoria.* (Golding & Harvey 2006)



Complementary NCVER Research

- Adult learning through fire and emergency services organisations in small and remote Australian towns. (Hayes, Golding and Harvey 2004)
- Men's sheds in community contexts: older men's learning programs and spaces in in Australia. (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, in preparation 2006)



Complementary ACE action research

- ‘Encouraging men’s learning’ Research Circles 1 (2005/6) & 2 (2006) Golding, Brown and Foley with Neufal.
- ‘Bringing in the blokes: A guide to attracting and involving men in community neighbourhood and learning centres’, 2nd Edition 2004, Learning Centre Link, Perth,



Some starting propositions

- It is difficult to provide services to men, women & communities, without accounting for theories of both masculinity and femininity.
- There are a number of useful feminist and masculinist theories, that need not be negative, hegemonic or mutually exclusive.
- It is important to recognise and cater for the specific and different needs of men & women, (and recognise sub-group disadvantage amongst both).
- Some organisations, spaces, programs, pedagogies & services are already gendered.



The common data collection method

- Exploration of existing data and research.
- Selection of multiple sites, using defensible selection criteria, common survey instruments and method.
- Researchers visit all sites and organisations to establish context and model reciprocity and trust.
- Survey distribution to participants through known and trusted local partners in community organisations, resulting in high response rates, good data quality and researcher experience of context.
- On-site survey of characteristics of the organisation.
- Network diagrams that establish community context.
- On-site focus group interviews with participants and coordinators / managers, recorded and transcribed.
- Early feedback to participants through organisations.



The common data analysis method

- Analysis of simple frequencies from participant surveys (A).
- Group categorisation of participants, organisations and site types (B).
- Cross tabulation of selected participant data (A) by selected site types & groups (B), and check for significant differences ($p < 0.05$).
- Investigation, based on all data sources including interviews, of nature and possible reasons for observed significant differences.



What does the research show?

- Informal learning through volunteer and community involvement plays a critical role for all adults.
- By virtue of their multiple roles, women are generally better networked beyond paid work than men.
- Men with limited or negative experiences of formal learning often lack opportunities for community engagement: many become socially excluded.
- Friendship, happiness, health, individual & community wellbeing are tightly associated with social inclusion & can be enhanced through learning.
- Social inclusion can be enhanced through practical, group activity in gendered community spaces.



It is important to recognise ...

- the extent and value of men's informal learning beyond ACE, and for ACE to collaborate to enhance that learning.
- that some community-based organisations (eg football clubs & CFA) are more effective learning sites in small towns than ACE for men involved in them.
- men's learning pedagogies need to account for quality of their engagement, including opportunities for friendship & mentoring with other men.
- that isolated men over 45 are unlikely to engage in new, formal or vocational learning without creatively renewing their community engagement.
- that men's sheds in community contexts provide some new ideas & opportunities for learning.



Men with negative prior learning experiences

- have significantly different and more difficult lives
- are much less likely to be engaged in community organisations or hold positions of responsibility
- are much less likely to be have happy or satisfying relationships at home, socially, at work or in the community
- experience significant problems with change as they age, including with relationships, technology, work, re-creation, health & retirement
- have more difficulty in engaging in or benefiting from most forms of new or essential learning.



Preferred pedagogies ‘What works for older men’

- Hands-on and practical
- Doing real tasks, of real and transferable benefit (to individual, group, family, business or community)
- Wherever possible, outside
- Involving informal mentoring in groups rather than teaching
- In places where men already feel ‘at home’, sometimes with other men.



New & recent theoretical insights.

Recognition of the ...

- determinants of **social exclusion**: consumption (income); production (employment); involvement in organisations; social interaction and family support.
- importance of **social capital** within & beyond learning contexts (+ pathologies associated with its absence)
- **situated-ness** of most effective learning.
- complex effects of **location, context** and **gender** on service provision and participant experience.
- **connected-ness** between different forms of service provision as well as participant benefits.



What can we learn from shed research?

- *'devise programs to make sheds more socially inclusive and productive learning centres'. (Earle, Earle & Von Mering 1999)*
- *Sheds are 'an important place or space for gathering men (a utility function) and for men to gather together (serving a social function).'* (Hayes and Williamson 2005, 'best-practice guidelines')
- *'Shedlessness' in retirement is an issue in aged care settings, particularly for men with dementia (Bettany 2005).*
- *'Though diverse in their origins, configurations, auspicing arrangements and purposes, men's sheds in community contexts share a common commitment to men's friendship, health and well being in conjunction with hands-on activity in group settings in a shed-type space for both individual and community benefit.'* (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2006 in prep).



Situated learning research and gender theory

'a sticky wicket'

- 'Sheds' have an important place in Australian male culture and mythology (Thompson 2002). 'Houses' tend to have some similar but obverse connotations for women.
- ACE has tended to position itself as a sector of choice specifically for & by women, underpinned by feminist perspectives not necessarily inclusive of or welcome to men. Some (but not all) men's sheds have tended to do likewise.
- Arguing masculinist perspectives for men (even from a pro-feminist position) can lead to a 'competing victims' syndrome and allegations of male 'backlash' against feminism.
- Arguing masculinist positions and male exclusion leads researchers into dangerous and hostile academic terrain, particularly if these positions are regarded as hegemonic.
- The possibility of men's under achievement and disadvantage is seen by some as undermining support for women.



Men's Sheds - in community contexts in Australia

- Have proliferated and diversified in community contexts in southern Australia, most since 2000.
- Grassroots organisations auspice them through a wide variety of organisation types, manly reaching older men.
- Community spread has been assisted by popular texts and research in aged care settings.
- 180 men's shed programs open or soon to open in Australia.
- Highest number of sheds/head of population in SA and Tasmania; half of sheds open are in SA & Vic.
- There are significant opportunities for ACE, health and aged care organisations to embrace, collaborate and learn from.



Why and how have men's sheds spread?

- There is insufficient account of older men's needs, identities & prior experiences in existing service providers (in health, welfare, education and aged care).
- It has become more acceptable for men to argue for and create places, spaces, programs and pedagogies that meet their different needs.
- Health and well being data for men of all ages indicate problems with health, happiness & wellbeing.
- There is a widespread 'underfoot syndrome' amongst older married couples, particularly in retirement.
- Men not engaged experience social exclusion & have limited opportunities to share or access learning.



Important new findings about women & sheds

- Shed organisations and participants vary greatly in their attitude to the involvement of women. There are also significant variations between the five states in the NCVET study.
- Most sheds have been established with women's active & direct involvement, particularly with the procurement of funding.
- There is consensus that sheds better fulfil their objectives if they are mainly for men and if the shed supervisor is a tradesman.
- Female partners of men who participate typically and strongly support the benefits to participants.
- Male participants with the most difficult social circumstances and health problems tend to prefer the company of other men.
- Men's sheds auspiced through ACE have worked very effectively, particularly in Victoria and very recently in Tasmania. Some actively include women.



Some broader contentions

- Adult and community education programs have tended to cater mainly for women.
- Aged care, health & welfare services and programs tend to be structured around the needs of women.
- Professional and community service roles in these areas have tended to be occupied mainly by women.
- Men have adapted less well to change and tend to become socially excluded, impacting on wellbeing.
- Older men tend to become socially isolated and have few opportunities to contribute to their communities.
- Some of these factors reinforce and impact particularly on older men in rural communities.



Broad implications for policy & practice

- Learning must be recognised & supported as a critical part of wellbeing, health & welfare provision, apart from its vocational value, for adults of all ages.
- The multiple and transferable benefits of learning informally have to be actively recognised & supported across all service providers.
- There are likely significant savings in health, welfare & aged care from strategic collaboration between ACE & other service providers for older Australians.
- There is a need to recognise, research and enhance the importance of gender in policies and practices associated with service provision in context.



Some specific implications for men

- There are significant new opportunities to enhance men's overall wellbeing, improve service provision and achieve community and organisational renewal through the application of principles derived from men's learning and men's sheds research.
- Men's informal learning has the potential to enhance older men's happiness, health, well being, relationships & community relationships in diverse settings within & beyond ACE, including aged care.
- There are opportunities to create synergies between disengaged young people at school and former tradesmen through hands-on mentoring in shed settings.



This is not new ... (some precursors of community-based men's sheds)

- Domestic men's sheds.
- Workshops and other settings where men have worked in teams.
- Railway, engine, car, motorbike, mining, forestry and farm machinery preservation societies.
- Engineering, automotive, plumbing and carpentry training settings.
- Shed-based fire brigades & SES.
- [Community and neighbourhood houses and ACE for women]



Conclusions

- Men with limited or negative experiences of formal learning are unlikely to present for or benefit from more of the same. Other ways have to be found.
- Men don't feel at home in or benefit from spaces and programs dedicated primarily to women's needs and organised by female structures of privilege and practice that deny men's different needs & diversity.
- Men's shed-type programs and spaces can provide a quality of engagement and a community of practice that is attractive and therapeutic for many older single and married men that is beneficial to communities.
- There are new opportunities for inter-agency cooperation of benefit to men's learning & wellbeing.



Contentions

- ACE has tended to (deliberately & successfully) cater for women's learning needs)
- The different learning needs of men, particularly older men, need to be more widely recognised and addressed.
- It is inaccurate to argue that men are not learning because they are not engaging in ACE.



The key to successful adult learning
(for men *and* women) is to find out:

- *what* people are already interested in
- *where* they prefer to learn
- *how* to increase the quality of their engagement
- (not what you think they ‘need to know’).



Unanswered but tantalising questions

- Is the deliberate retreat by males from formal learning and work normal and unproblematic?
- Is a male only shed desirable?
- Do men-only learning and community organisations solve (or perpetuate) men's isolation & difference?
- Does an 'ACE for women' and 'sheds for men' strategy risk a form of gendered apartheid?
- To what extent are there 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?
- If men's sheds were re-badged as men well being, health and learning centres, would they used or be effective?



New (2006) References

- *Shedding new light on new pLACEs for men over 45*, Golding , B (2006) ACFE Board.
- *Results from a survey of men's sheds participants in Victoria*, Golding, B and Harvey, J (2006)
<http://www.acfe.vic.gov.au/docs/Men's%20learning%20through%20ACE%20-%20Executive%20Summary.doc>
- Radio interview on Men's Sheds in Australia, of relevance to the forthcoming (2006) NCVER research. Barry Golding
<http://www.taketimeradio.com/contents.htm>
- *Men's sheds in in Australia: learning through community contexts*, Golding, B, Brown, M, Foley, A, Harvey, J and Gleeson, L (forthcoming, NCVER 2006)

Questions



about the research, its findings &
implications