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Researching Men's Sheds in Community Contexts in Australia: What does it tell us about Adult Education for Older Men?

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Abstract: This paper reports research into community-based men's sheds in Australia, focusing on how regular activity in these sheds impacts on the informal learning experiences of the mainly older men who use them. It focuses on how men's learning experiences in sheds informs adult education in community contexts for older men.

Introduction

Men's sheds in community contexts are a relatively new, diverse, loosely coupled and poorly known set of community-based, grassroots organisations - found only in Australia. These informal, workshop-based spaces and programs in community settings have grown recently and rapidly in mainly southern Australia. Unlike personal, 'backyard' sheds, they are available to groups of men and are typically organised by and auspiced through existing community organisations. They usually provide a group wood workshop space, tools and equipment and an adjacent social area in a public, shed-type setting.

The attraction of backyard sheds to men in Australia is widely recognised and was the subject of several popular books in the 1990s in Australia, the UK and New Zealand. Earle, Earle and Von Mering (1996, p. 6) suggested that '... the personal attachment that Australian men have to their shed suggests that they represent a cultural icon of significant social psychological importance.' Apart from recent evaluations of individual men's shed organisations and Golding's research with others into the learning function of sheds, the only other community men's shed-based research has been undertaken by Hayes and Williamson (2006) into some aspects of Victorian men's sheds.

Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson (2007, p. 2) found a wide range of community-based men's shed organisations amongst the 150 they had located and mapped to late 2006. They identified the essence of men's sheds in community contexts when they described them as sharing '... a common commitment to older men's friendships, health and wellbeing in conjunction with regular and supervised hands-on activity in group settings in a shed-type space for both individual and community benefit.' Their research into these community-based men's sheds across Australia, focused particularly on ways in which the nature and organisation of the sheds impacts on the informal learning experiences and lives of the mainly older men who use them. It forms part of a wider suite of ongoing research focusing on men's learning in Australia. The research into men's learning to 2005 is summarised in Golding (2006) and updated in Golding (2007b). Some of the gender implications of this research into men are further explored in Golding (2007a).

The current paper focuses particularly on what the completed research tells us about adult education for older men (age over 45 years). It includes consideration of the rationales for creating these new and supportive masculine spaces in community contexts for groups of older men, including a profile of the shed participants, the nature of the

learning activities as well as men's experiences, benefits and outcomes from participating. There are plans for similar, subsequent and separately funded international research in Australia, Canada, New Zealand the UK in 2008/9 that will allow direct international comparisons of findings about where men learn other than through formal, accredited programs and organisations. The proposed research complements the small amount of other research in the world on similar themes including groundbreaking research in the UK by McGivney (1999a; 1999b; 2004).

Why Bother about Men?

Recent Australian literature (Lattimore, 2007) shows that men not in the workforce who are economically inactive comprise a large and growing proportion of all men. While the loss of economic activity associated with the non-participation of men is substantial, an equally important dimension of the impact on men is social. While economic inactivity in retirement is predictable and desirable, involuntary withdrawal of males from the labour force below retirement age (less than 65 years in Australia) can impose adverse economic and social impacts on the men concerned and require costly social welfare support. Lattimore (2007) identified a reduced tolerance in contemporary economies for the employment of men with disabilities and lower skills, the feminisation of many new forms of work, and for some men of being left behind by this change. Lattimore also showed that economically inactive men tend to group together spatially and that their distribution is strongly age-related. Golding's research cited below shows that un-partnered men, men without other community connections and men who did not enjoy or benefit from school are most vulnerable, benefit least from formal training but benefit most from informal community involvement with other men.

Wider Context for this Suite of Research

The research into community-based men's sheds builds on other community-based research in Australia that identifies the benefits of community-based men's learning, particularly for men in socially disadvantaged and geographically isolated regional areas (Golding, Harvey, & Echter, 2004). It complements other research into the multiple values of learning to men, their businesses, families and communities of involvement in volunteer fire brigades and emergency service organisation (Hayes, Golding, & Harvey, 2004). The men's sheds research took place in the context of recently reported research that confirms increasing difficulties for men who leave the workforce early, and the relatively pessimistic international literature on the value of formal training for re-integrating displaced older males into the workforce (Lattimore, 2007).

There is a perceived national imperative in Australia to improve educational opportunities for adults with no formal qualifications to improve their employment prospects (NCVER, 2007, p. 13). Recent Australian research findings confirm intersections between the location of economically inactive prime age and older men in Australia (Lattimore, 2007) and the location of extreme social disadvantage in Australia (Vinson, 2007). Our map of these men's sheds in Australia (Golding Brown, Foley, Harvey & Echter, 2007) suggests a reasonably close fit in southern Australia between the distribution of community-based men's sheds in Australia, the distribution of men not in work and social disadvantage. Research into aging (Productivity Commission, 2005) suggests that men who form part the largest ten year age cohort in Australia (40-49 years)

are increasingly likely to leave paid employment early. Economically inactive men of working age are also much more likely to have no formal post-school qualifications and live or move to areas of concentrated and intersecting disadvantage.

Method

Data were collected by on-site interview and survey (N=211, response rate 70.6 per cent) from a sample of 24 of approximately 125 men's sheds open in July 2006 in five Australian States. Surveys were administered by and through representatives of those organisations after the site visits. This resulted in high response rates and confident analyses of frequencies and tests of significant difference for most variables and participant sub-groups. All focus group interviews were audiotaped. All tapes were fully transcribed and qualitative data were extracted by thematic searches of transcripts.

Findings

Who Uses Community-Based Men's Sheds and Why?

One half of men who participated were over the official Australian retirement age of 65 years and 89 per cent were over 45 years. Consistent with this older age participant cohort, most men had relatively limited formal school and post-school education and training backgrounds. While not having access to a shed where they live ('shedlessness') was one factor affecting some men, a need for the friendship of other men in a place that affirms positive aspects of masculinity would appear to be the most important, critical factor that leads men to actively and voluntarily participate. Men particularly enjoyed and benefited from the lack of compulsion, opportunities for mentoring and sociability associated with the shed as well as the strong sense of belonging and the prospect of improving their health and wellbeing. Men particularly enjoyed the opportunity to 'get out of the house' and almost all 'feel at home' in the shed.

Men's Shed-based Learning Experiences

Men's sheds cater informally but very effectively for the mainly non-vocational social, health, wellbeing and learning needs of mainly older men. Their main benefit is that they cater for the holistic as well as the specific, often acute needs of an otherwise difficult-to-reach group of older and sometimes isolated men - typically experiencing complex and difficult changes in their working lives, status and identity, their physical and mental health, their relationships and identities as men. Ninety five per cent of men agreed they were keen to learn more and nine out of ten agreed that being part of the men's shed helps them to learn. This was despite the fact that less than three out of ten men agreed that they 'really enjoyed learning at school'.

The learning that men mainly identified they had access to through the shed organisation were leisure skills (80% agreement), technical craft or trade skills (66% agreement) and safety or health skills (62% agreement). Most men attributed the benefits of that informal learning to the home and the community. Only one in five men who participated in men's sheds expected to get paid work, limiting the usefulness of skills that might transfer to work. Around six out of ten men expressed a definite interest in further learning. Of those men who answered 'yes' or 'maybe' to the prospect of further learning, the overwhelming preference was for hands-on learning, though at least half of men also preferred learning where they could meet other people, via special interest

courses, in small groups or through field days of demonstrations. The overwhelming preference was for learning in the shed from another member in practical situations, by doing and in groups with other men.

Perceptions about Outcomes from Participating

Men surveyed were particularly positive about their experiences in the shed. Virtually all men felt 'at home' in the shed, had made good friends there and appreciated the chance to mentor others. More than 90 per cent of men agreed that the shed was a place to meet new friends, to be with other men, to learn new skills, to keep them healthy and also to 'get out of the house'. The interview data confirmed this need to get out of the house applied both to men with partners who experienced 'underfoot syndrome' and men without partners who were lonely for the company of other men.

Discussion

The Rationale for Creating Masculine Spaces in Community Contexts

Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson (2007) identified some important distinctions between masculinities practiced by men who use community-based men's sheds and traditional and largely negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Golding & Foley (2007) concluded, after an analysis of the gender issues associated with creating masculine spaces in community contexts, that adult and community education tends to be underpinned by feminist pedagogies and practice that tends not to encourage or welcome working class masculinities and pedagogies. They argued that as long as that is the case, men have both a right and responsibility for their own wellbeing to create informal learning spaces such as community-based men's sheds that address and deliver their particular and different needs. They concluded that there are a number of good reasons for encouraging men to meet, socialise and informally learn in all male groups such as men's sheds, as advanced in general terms by Flood (2005, p. 4). Flood suggested that 'the best involvements in men or boy's issues' should be underpinned by three 'interrelated principles: they are male positive, they are gender just, and they recognise diversity and are inclusive'.

What Learning Role do Sheds play in Men's Learning?

Men's shed participants generally have limited and negative experiences of formal education. Men therefore particularly enjoy the opportunity to informally learn and share leisure, technical, trade, craft, safety or health skills. The main skills gained informally by men are seen to transfer positively to the home and to the community. While skills that transfer directly to paid work are seen to be relatively minor by most men, for those men with the intention of re-entering paid work, this opportunity to learn such skills is regarded as positive and valuable. Around three-quarters of men were interested in some form of further learning through the shed, in particular via hands on, practical situations, preferably in informal contexts where they can meet other people, learn and mentor in groups with other men, by demonstration and wherever possible outdoors. Men's sheds as they are currently configured tend to already match the informal learning needs and preferences of this older demographic of participants, one in four of whom experience difficulties with their learning skills. Surveys confirmed that any further learning should be informal and facilitated 'in house' (in effect through the

men's shed), ideally from and with other participants with the necessary skills in the same shed setting.

The Wider Role of Men's Sheds in Community Contexts

For many older married and retired men, the men's shed appears to provide a welcome and positive circuit breaker for both men and women from the 'underfoot syndrome' in the family home, particularly where the man has experienced retirement or unemployment. Men's sheds therefore have more to do producing significant, non-vocational benefits through informal, collective, community involvement than formal, individual program enrolment and seldom provide direct vocational pathways to future paid work. They are therefore difficult to analyse and categorise within a formal vocational education and training typology. The programs and spaces certainly encourage and perpetuate men's workshop-based, hands-on, trade skills typical of enterprise-based wood and metal workshops and pay close attention to compulsory occupational health and safety practices. However the current emphasis in sheds is low on formal and current industry competencies for working in contemporary industry workplaces.

By virtue of the situated nature of the informal learning that they encourage in community settings, men's sheds model pedagogies more similar to those found in adult and community education (ACE). What is different is that they deliberately create an area for socialisation in a men's workshop rather than in a house or learning centre designed primarily for and by women. The practical, hands-on nature of shed-based, workshop activity has also been found to be very successful for the small number of sheds in Australia that have specialised in mentoring and teaching carpentry skills to disengaged young people of school age (Golding Brown, & Foley, 2007).

Conclusions

Despite their diverse origins, locations, configurations, auspicing organisations and purposes, men's sheds organisations share a common commitment to older men's friendship, health and wellbeing in conjunction with regular and supervised hands-on activity in group settings in a shed-type space for both individual and community benefit. They run v 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.

Through the deliberate research focus on both learning and men, the findings from sheds have the potential to inform studies of men's vocational, adult and community education and training. The research makes important links between the benefits of learning and men's wellbeing, including health, employment and fatherhood. It has enabled us to hear what men have to say as well as what they experience through active engagement in 'safe' spaces and voluntary organisations with other men. The research has identified factors that put men off attending adult education. They include previous negative experiences of schooling, an aversion to formal learning, limited access to education training and services, access to computers, remoteness, age discrimination in employment, sickness and disability, caring and family roles. Any of these factors can make men redundant and keep them out of the workforce in urban, regional and rural contexts.

The key finding from the research is confounding and counter-intuitive: that for older men, active participation in communities of practice is possibly more conducive to

learning than involvement or enrolment in vocational or adult education. Shed-based activity in particular provides a critically important, positive and therapeutic, male-positive context that satisfies a wide range of needs not currently available to older men in more formal learning settings or in typical adult learning providers. Men's sheds in community contexts provide an important and voluntary social and community outlet for older retired men, particularly for working class men who are less likely than other men to participate in adult and community education. They provide new opportunities for men of all ages to continue to pool their considerable skills and experiences for mutual and community benefit in safe, friendly and familiar workplace settings.

Older working class men appear to prefer to learn informally in workplace-type settings that are practical, regular, hands on and involve working productively in teams with other men. In many other ways, unlike the difficult, stressful and dangerous workplaces that many men have been injured or rejected by, withdrawn or retired from, men's sheds in community contexts are totally different. Men like the fact that they are voluntary, social, safe, inclusive and therapeutic. The emphasis is on the man and not the product or on workshop efficiencies. The shed is in effect one place where men can feel at home and experience important and positive aspects of masculinity outside of home with other men.

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