

# Common Wealth Through Community Men's Sheds: Lives and Learning Networks Beyond Work

Barry Golding, University of Ballarat, Australia

b.golding@ballarat.edu.au

## Abstract

This paper explores the recent phenomenon and benefits of community men's sheds in Australia, focusing on the important role sheds and workshop-based practice plays in creating informal learning and friendship networks for men. It is based on recent studies of organizations and contexts in Australia that informally and effectively engage men. Problems are identified with front-end models of vocational training that disregard or undervalue the lifetime of skills and experiences built up by men in previous paid work roles and in adult and community education sectors that tend not to cater for men or diverse masculinities. Insights are provided into ways in which men's skills and experiences can be shared, transferred, valued and celebrated in men's livelihoods beyond paid work, through regular, shared, hands-on activity in gendered communities of practice. It particularly explores the untapped potential of open and flexible shed-based practice for men's vocational retraining, lifelong learning and inter-generational skills transfer. The 'open' and inclusive nature of the community shed and what occurs in it and its pedagogical familiarity with men are identified as its key strengths. The paper identifies what it is about the nature of community-based men's sheds that has proven to be increasingly popular, productive and therapeutic in Australia in the past decade. One of my purposes at presenting at this conference is to seek out, identify and learn about different and similar insights from conference participants from other countries that might contribute to an ongoing international study of men's informal learning beyond the workplace. My paper particularly seeks to identify shed and workshop-type settings and organizations in other national and cultural contexts that might play a similar role in the livelihoods of men, families and communities.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper and its emphasis on community men's sheds in Australia need to be briefly placed in a wider context for international readers. Adult education in Australia has been widely regarded as the 'Cinderella' sector (*Beyond Cinderella* 1997) for a number of good reasons. It has been relatively poorly supported by national policy or funding compared to the university and vocational education and training (VET) sectors and has had difficulty in the new world of outcome-based, vocationally-oriented programs to articulate or formally demonstrate its community or national value and outcomes. ACE (Adult and Community Education) providers otherwise faced with very limited, state government funding have increasingly subsisted with funding from other sources including from private provision which involves user pays. In 2008 its national coverage is more limited than ever. ACE maintains a presence as a comprehensive, state-supported sector in only one Australian state (Victoria) as government funding commitments to the ACE sector in Australia's most populous state (New South Wales) have recently waned.

While national adult and lifelong learning policies espouse access and equity for all learners, the overwhelming national policy and emphasis is on higher education degrees and accredited vocational education and training for people already in work or anticipating work as a consequence. Until very recently the primary emphasis in practice and pedagogy in the small number of ACE providers has been directed towards women as participants (Gribble and Davison 1991; Clemans 2005). For decades only one quarter of all Australian ACE participants (Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001) and ten per cent of neighbourhood house participants (DVC 2007: Victorian data) have been men. In the past decade, particularly since the research by McGivney (1999, 2004) in the UK, it has become more common and acceptable in academic circles to question whether and which men might be missing or excluded from adult education. My research with others into men's learning in Australia (Golding, Harvey & Echter 2005), most recently into the role of community-based men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007), are part of this trend. It has been

motivated by a realisation that whilst many women remain disadvantaged in terms of access to and particularly outcomes from adult and lifelong learning, particularly disadvantaged subgroups of men, including the increasing proportion of men not in paid work (Lattimore 2007), are either avoiding, not being embraced or inadequately served by any government-supported adult learning sector that is not vocationally oriented.

The role and importance of learning has changed radically for most older (defined as 45+ years) Australian adults in recent decades. The penalties associated with *not* being a lifelong learner, particularly not being internet and computer literate, has become particularly acute in Australia. The result is that older adults, particularly men with limited and negative experiences of school and low formal English and computer literacy have typically not had access to the functional literacies, preferred pedagogies or education providers and programs that might otherwise allow them to access the bottom tier of accredited vocational training programs. The ICT-based open learning platforms (including hardware), that younger people typically have access to and facility with, to upgrade their skills or qualifications, including the ability to self-learn and socially network on-line, are typically not available or familiar to older learners. At the same time advances in health and aged care and trends towards earlier retirement have extended the number of years older Australian men can expect to live beyond their paid working lives. Combined with a general ageing of the population, earlier retirement and the significant number of older men with a disability, around one third of Australian men are not in paid work in 2008 (Lattimore 2007) though only four per cent are unemployed.

## **METHOD**

The findings reported come from an ongoing suite of research into aspects of men's learning by Golding with others as summarised in Golding, Foley & Brown (2007) and Golding (2008 forthcoming). That research has involved extensive, mixed method, grounded research involving on-site surveys and focus group interviews with men and other stakeholders in a range of community-based learning organizations across Australia with a particular focus on rural Australia. These organizations have included volunteer fire brigades, adult and community education providers, aged care and land care organizations and sporting clubs. The men's sheds research cited is relatively recent and not restricted to rural areas, but in several important senses is derivative of and guided by the theoretical perspectives, findings and methodologies developed in previous research. One of my intentions in presenting at this conference is to seek out, identify and learn about different and similar insights from conference participants from other countries that might contribute to an ongoing international study of men's informal learning beyond the workplace. That study (Golding, Foley & Brown 2007) aims in the longer term to identify shed and workshop-type settings and organizations in other national and cultural contexts that might play a similar positive role in the wellbeing of men, families and communities beyond the Commonwealth.

## **FINDINGS**

### **What are community men's sheds and why are important?**

As a consequence of limited opportunities through existing social and community networks and organizations, older men not in paid work in Australia have begun to actively self-organise and create places to regularly and safely engage in useful, hands-on activity with other men, in settings described as community men's sheds. While domestic work sheds and tool sheds behind houses in backyards and gardens have been recognized as attractive and culturally iconic for men in some other countries for many decades, it is only in the past decade that the idea of community sheds as places for men to do things together has taken off in Australia (and in 2008, New Zealand), to a point that in 2008 there are over 200 community sheds open across mainly southern Australia. Research suggest that sheds provide a critically important, new 'third place' (Oldenburg 2000) for many older men other than work or home to give them access to the regular activity essential to their social wellbeing and psychological health. Oldenburg identifies third places as offering a neutral public space for community members to connect and establish bonds. Our recent, shed-based research (Golding, Brown, Foley et al 2007) shows that sheds in community settings

provide all of the important, third place attributes that Oldenburg identifies as essential, with the ability to ‘... host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.’ At the same time community sheds promote social equality by levelling the status of participants, encouraging mentoring and supporting individuals and communities. What is different and potentially contentious is that sheds create gendered places in community and neighbourhood settings deliberately for men, not unlike the way neighbourhood houses have been specifically configured for women (Clemans 2005; Golding, Kimberley, Foley & Brown 2007). Community sheds raise new, important, and as yet unresolved, implications for gendered practice in community settings, in particular around women’s desirable roles as potential participants and stakeholders (Golding & Foley 2008).

The rapid and recent, grassroots spread of the Australian community men’s sheds ‘movement’ is of particular interest and importance for several reasons that are best summarised as having to do with place, the ‘push and pull’ for men and the participation principles, pedagogies and practices. While some women are involved in some community sheds as participants and coordinators, sheds are essentially places for and about men and their wellbeing: to regularly and informally participate, learn, mentor other men, improve and maintain their social networks, physical activity and health and contribute positively to their communities. While learning, health, friendship and wellbeing are important aims and demonstrable outcomes, the success of community sheds lies in part in not identifying these roles in the shed names. Around two thirds of shed organizations have named the community space as a *men’s* shed: the balance have tended not to want to overtly exclude women, often for fear of violating equal opportunity legislation.

The deliberate choice of the shed as a focal point for regular community involvement, particularly for older men, is of considerable interest and suggestive of a number of factors that ‘pull’ men towards shed-type settings in the company of other men and ‘push’ them from home. For some men, the gendered, shed-based community of practice recreates positive aspects of previously familiar, hands-on work environments, though without the compulsion or pressure of paid work. Working ‘shoulder to shoulder’ rather than face-to-face with other men is a particular attraction. The push from home includes but is not restricted to the loneliness and isolation many single men experience who live alone. Men and their partners in happy, stable relationships also articulate their sense of needing to ‘get out of the house’ for some of the week to avoid ‘underfoot syndrome’ in retirement and to positively contribute their lifetime of skills and experience to their communities. Almost universally, men participate with the strong support of families including spouses, who recognize and benefit from men who are perceived to be happier, more connected, motivated and healthier as a consequence.

The participation principles and pedagogies that underpin community-based shed practice are identified as being close to those predicted as being ideal for men in rural community settings, based on previous research by Golding, Harvey & Echter (2005). Shed participation is seen by participants as being most enjoyable and positive when it is regular but discretionary, supervised but non-hierarchical and underpinned by trusting relationships, social rituals and activities. Learning is facilitated through informal mentoring and ‘hands-on’ activity rather than through teaching and programs.

This shed-based research demonstrates that there are other ways to engage men in programs and services, apart from beginning with negative hegemonic, ‘male deficit’ models of provision. Research shows that being both culturally iconic and male-positive, sheds in Australia have the capacity to attract, involve and connect precisely those men who might otherwise be difficult and reluctant to involve in conventional programs and services in more formal educational, therapeutic or clinical settings that are less comfortable places for many older men. Importantly, men who are most at risk of disconnection and the consequences typically associated with social isolation, benefit most.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Running along the gender tightrope**

The most difficult and potentially contentious aspect of this research, and the important condition we would place on proliferation of shed-based principles to community contexts in other nations and cultures is the need to provide improved lives, health and happiness underpinned by access and equity principles for some men, but at the same time to provide more equal opportunities and life outcomes for most women. There is a need to avoid the slide away from either side of this 'gender tightrope'. This involves recognising the relatively disadvantaged position of most women in most cultures and contexts, but not seeing all men, all organizations in which men tend to congregate and one, universal, negative or hegemonic masculinity as *the* problem or attribute of all men. Australian research into contexts in which men positively contribute to their communities through voluntary, regular participation in communities of men's practice raises questions about the longer-term wisdom of the trend in many relatively developed countries towards health, welfare, aged care and adult education programs which offer services and programs primarily staffed by and for women. Limiting the provision of services to those organizations that are female gendered in terms of their participation principles, pedagogies and practices can have undesired and potentially negative consequences for men who are already significantly isolated and objectively disadvantaged based on the known social determinants of health (WHO 2003). There is also the likelihood that not working positively to reconnect these men to their communities and to the more positive and less hegemonic aspects of men's diverse masculinities will further disadvantage men's families, including women and children as well as their communities - and further damage and isolate these men.

### **Positive signs of change in Australia**

Several developments, prompted in part by strategic research, government supported research into men's informal learning, have begun to make inroads into attracting more men to community learning centres and neighbourhood houses across Australia. In Victoria in 2005 and 2006 'Men's Learning Research Circles' (Naufal, Golding & Brown 2006) worked with adult and community education providers in order to encourage more men as participants. In Western Australia LCL (2004) undertook a study aimed at attracting and involving men in community and neighbourhood and learning centres based on the realisation that 'Centres can be of great benefit to men and men can bring much value to centres' (p,3). Shed-based organizations across Australia are now being carefully examined by and creatively accommodated within adult education, neighbourhood house and community centre organizations that had neither previously attracted nor accommodated the particular needs of older and retired, working class men as well as men not in work.

Importantly, this research has begun to identify a potentially positive, theoretical watershed between the downsides and extremes of both hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity. When this research was first proposed there was significant resistance in Australia from some women because of the fear it might take funds and the emphasis away from some women's programs and services. In 2008 it has become acceptable to theorise about men and to countenance the possibility that communities can be richer if the positive aspects of some men's communities of practice can be identified, positively accommodated and embraced. In the state of Victoria government supported adult education research and policy is now deliberately inclusive of older men. In 2008 Victorian government funds are being disbursed to support a large number of new and existing men's sheds as state-based and national community men's shed associations develop (see [www.mensshed.org](http://www.mensshed.org)). Research by Hayes & Williamson (2007) has recently extended to examine the potential of shed-based models to improve and address significant disparities in men's health and longevity including for Aboriginal Australians.

One of the most exciting developments is the way in which shed-based organizations in Australia are proliferating, specialising and working with particular groups of men and also young people. Some community sheds specialise in reconnecting school resisters through regular and disciplined, hands-on mentoring in shed-type settings. Some sheds cater specifically for war veterans with a raft of long-term problems typically associated consequences of combat experience and injuries. Others are recreating shed-type experiences in aged care settings that allow men with dementia to positively and collectively reminisce. Other sheds work specifically with Indigenous men, refugees, isolated single men

or men with acquired brain injury. In many rural and remote Australian towns severely affected by climate change, shed-based organizations have undertaken numerous voluntary projects for local communities and organizations. In all cases the deliberate emphasis is on learning and mentoring - not on teaching; on working positively with men to change their own lives rather than intervening using deficit models of men and masculinity; on encouraging preventative health and happiness rather than limiting services to and for men with problems; on male positive environments where men's diverse lives, experiences and positive masculinities are celebrated and shared.

## CONCLUSION

Several important conclusions come out of recent shed-based research in Australia that are of potential interest and importance in other nations, particularly in the fields of community engagement, health and lifelong learning for groups of older men not in paid work. These conclusions are likely to apply most directly to nations experiencing problems associated with aging populations where working men have lost the link to the social advantages of regular paid work with other men. However several conclusions might be adapted in other nations with different but similarly culturally attractive spaces and activities. It can be anticipated that many other places in which men have traditionally but informally gathered, learnt and interacted in other national and cultural contexts have attributes that are important to retain in order to maintain men's wellbeing, without necessarily disadvantaging or oppressing women.

This paper explores the recently identified potential of open and flexible shed-based practice for men's vocational retraining, lifelong learning and inter-generational skills transfer. The 'open' and inclusive nature of the community shed and what occurs in it and its pedagogical familiarity with men are identified as its key strengths. From a theoretical perspective, there is copious evidence that community sheds build common wealth including social capital, create opportunities for social and situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991) and address the well-known social determinants of health (WHO 2003). There is scope to extend research into the value of other informal and workshop-type settings in other national and cultural contexts that are male-positive, culturally attractive and therapeutic without necessarily oppressing women. It is also possible to conclude that it is not desirable to rely on formal and impersonal front-end models of vocational training, including the internet, that disregard or undervalue the value of face to face interaction or the value of sharing a lifetime of skills and experiences built up informally by men and women in previous paid work roles. There is also a need for adult and community education sectors to cater for older men's preferred pedagogies and diverse masculinities.

## REFERENCES

- Beyond Cinderella* (1997) *Beyond Cinderella: Towards a Learning Society*, Report of the Australian Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, Canberra.
- Clemans, A (2005) *Community Education Work: So Close to Home!*, PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, Parkville.
- DVC (2007) Department of Victorian Communities, *Participation in Neighbourhood Houses: Results of the 2006 Census*, DVC, Melbourne.
- Golding B, Davies M & Volkoff V (2001) *A Consolidation of ACE Research 1990-2000, Review of Research*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Golding, B (2008 forthcoming) Men's informal learning beyond the workplace, Chapter in S Jackson (ed.), *Innovations in Lifelong Learning*, University of London, London.
- Golding, B, Brown, M, Foley, A, Harvey, J & Gleeson, L (2007) *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Golding, B & Foley, A (2008) How men are worked with: Gender roles in men's informal learning, Paper to SCUTREA Conference, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, 2-4 July.
- Golding, B, Foley, A & Brown, M (2007) 'The international potential for men's shed based learning', *Ad Lib, Journal of Continuing Liberal Adult Education* 34 (Dec), 9-13, University of Cambridge.

- Golding, B, Harvey J, & Echter, A (2005) *Men's Learning Through ACE and Community Involvement in Small Rural Towns: Findings from a Victorian Survey*, Final report to Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Melbourne.
- Golding, B, Kimberley, H, Foley, A & Brown, M (2007) Houses and sheds: An exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings, Paper to Adult Learning Australia Conference. Cairns, 8-10 November 2007.
- Gribble, H, & Davidson, D (1991) Invisible owners: Women in Australian adult education, in *Adult and Continuing Education in Australia: Issues and Practices*, M Tennant (ed.) , Routledge, London, 138-152.
- Hayes, R & Williamson (2007) *Men's Sheds: Exploring the Evidence for Best Practice*, Report for Office of Senior Victorians, School of Public Health, La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Lattimore, R (2007) *Men Not at Work: An Analysis of Men Outside the Labour Force*, Australian Productivity Commission, Canberra.
- Lave J & Wenger E (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- LCL (2004) Learning Centre Link, *Bringing in the Blokes*, Perth, Australia.
- McGivney, V (1999) *Excluded Men: Men who are Missing from Education and Training*, NIACE, Leicester.
- McGivney, V (2004) *Men Earn, Women Learn: Bridging the Gender Divide in Education and Training*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Naufal, R, Golding, B & Brown, M (2006) *Research Circle: Encourageing Men's Learning*, Final Report to ACFE Board, ACFE, Melbourne.
- Oldenburg, R (2000) *Celebrating the Third Place*, Marlowe, New York.
- WHO (2003) World Health Organization, *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts*, R Wilkinson & M Marmott (eds.), WHO, Copenhagen.