

THE INTERNATIONAL POTENTIAL FOR MEN'S SHED-BASED LEARNING

**New evidence from men's sheds in
community contexts in Australia**

Our paper uses new data from research into informal learning through community-based 'men's sheds' organisations, that have proliferated rapidly and recently across much of southern Australia, to ask 'What is the potential for shed-based community learning in other countries?' It is based on a continuing suite of Australian research into informal learning occurring in community contexts for men (Golding, 2006a), particularly research into men not in paid work. The research was prompted by findings about the importance of informal learning in communities of practice, initially for men in Australian rural volunteer fire brigades (Hayes, Golding & Harvey, 2003). The research has come into higher relief in the context of Australian concerns, shared in many developed nations, related to the unmet needs of a growing proportion of men not in paid work (Lattimore, 2007). It has been informed most recently through research findings about the nature and value of men's sheds in community contexts (Golding, 2006b; Golding & Harvey, 2006; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007; Golding Brown & Foley, 2007). Our men's sheds research demonstrates the success of sheds in creating friendly communities of regular, hands-on practice for older, retired and disconnected men who often seem to find it difficult to connect to formal learning and other services. It is also informed by conference papers by Barry Golding in 2007 in Sweden (Golding, 2007a), Canada (Golding, 2007b), Scotland (Golding, 2007c) and Ireland (Golding, Foley & Brown, 2007). It is also informed by field reconnaissance in 2007 each of these countries as well as England, Wales and New Zealand. In each of these countries men's personal workplaces, including workshops and garden sheds, are known anecdotally, to be particularly attractive for many men. Our contention is that some of what we observe in Australia might be transferable internationally from this recent and surprising, recent

Australian grassroots movement that has led men to 'come out' of their homes and backyard sheds. It appears timely to further explore ways in which informal learning might take place in a similar way for men, particularly older men not in paid work, through communities of hands-on practice, in other national and cultural contexts.

An introduction to community-based sheds in Australia

Personal, backyard sheds have long been regarded in Australia as a popular, almost iconic men's domain. A man's shed has typically been seen as a place for (most often) the male in a household to go, usually on their own, to make and do things for themselves and for the family (Thomson, 1995). While role stereotypes and demographics are changing for many younger Australians, the house has been seen, by contrast, mainly as women's space. It is no accident that the women seeking to improve opportunities for adult and community education (ACE) in Australia in the 1970s connected the word 'house' to both 'community' and 'neighbourhood' to create informal, community-based learning centres that mainly, deliberately and very successfully attracted women. It is only in the past decade that some Australian men have begun to 'come out' of their backyard sheds in a somewhat similar way to set up sheds in community settings for the use of men (Golding, Kimberley, Foley & Brown, 2007). These shed-based community organisations, to late 2007, number over 200 in mainly southern Australia. It is these sheds that are the subject of our current paper.

The method of our men's shed research

Our detailed research method is found in Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson (2007): see <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr5011s.pdf>. In brief, our research involved extensive interviews and surveys (N=211, response rate 70.3%) with participants and coordinators/managers in 24 community men's sheds in five Australian States in early 2006. While we anticipated and found evidence of other, positive roles such sheds play and the communities they serve, our research concentrated primarily on their informal learning function.

What roles do community sheds play for men?

Men are diverse - and not all men are attracted to the idea of socialising in a community-based workshop setting. While those that are attracted come for a wide range of reasons and from very diverse situations, at the risk of oversimplifying, our data identifies that men tend to come from two different groups for somewhat different reasons. The first group are men (who for whatever reason) are not in regular, paid work and who live with a partner. Such men benefit (as do their partners and families) from regular activity and social contact with other men outside of the home. These men with partners tend to be relatively secure, older, retired, ex-tradesmen with a number of skills to share in the shed and in its day-to-day running and management. The 'push' to go to the shed for these men often tends to be related to 'underfoot syndrome' at home. In retirement in particular, most couples understand the desirability of having some parts of their social lives, weekly activities and interests as separate and different. The 'pull' of the shed for these men with partners tends to come from a lifetime of working with other men in hands-on or workshop-based practice, which they enjoy but no longer have ready access to other than in their own sheds and workshops. In the community shed they are in a strong position to mentor and socialise with other men, pass on their specialist knowledge and give back to the community.

The second broad group are men without partners, many of whom live alone. Such men benefit from 'getting out of the house' simply to be with other people. The push factor tends to be loneliness and isolation. The pull factor is essentially social. The shed also provides such single men with an opportunity to learn new skills, and like the other group, to positively contribute to the community. Men in this situation tend, on average, to be younger than retirement age, have less shed-based previous experience, less current access to a shed at home, and

most importantly, have had more difficulty in their lives. These difficulties sometimes include one or more of limited and negative experiences of education and training (particularly of school), periods of unemployment, separation from a partner or children, substance abuse and disability. Importantly, men who live alone, including the higher proportion of single men subject to a range of social and health problems, are also significantly less comfortable about sharing the shed with women than are men with partners.

While these two broad groups are apparent in our data they are not immediately identifiable within a 'typical' community-based shed in Australia for three main reasons. Firstly, it is because once *in* the shed, men's working lives, experiences, backgrounds and hierarchies tend to be put aside. In several senses, the shed becomes a 'leveller' where men are free and equal to share and participate (or to socialise) simply as men. Secondly, while the shed-based needs and experiences of both groups tend to be different, they also tend to be complementary. Both groups learn from each other's different skills and life experiences in what is essentially a mutual, mentoring role. Thirdly, it is because some sheds tend not to have both groups of men present. For example some shed organisations cater specifically for isolated, single and sometimes unemployed men or men with a disability. Other sheds cater primarily for ex-tradesmen who are typically partnered in early retirement. It is the less specialised sheds typical of rural towns and suburban neighbourhoods that tend to embrace all comers and are therefore more likely to attract and include both groups.

Why do men participate and what do they experience?

Our research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007, p.33) confirms a number of important positive attributes about community sheds for men, particularly for older men. These include

... the lack of compulsion, opportunities for socialising as well as a strong sense of belonging, health and wellbeing. Virtually all men (98%) agreed that they enjoyed 'being able to make

what I want', the social aspect' (99%) and 'being able to come when I want to' (97%). Virtually all men (97%) agreed that they felt at home in the shed' ... Virtually all respondents (99%) had 'made good friends in the shed'. ... The chance to mentor others was also regarded as overwhelmingly positive, with 99% of respondents agreeing.

What are the outcomes and benefits of participating in men's shed programs?

The interview and survey data from our research show that men experience many social, cultural and health benefits through their participation in men's sheds. Men unlikely to participate in more conventional health, wellbeing, employment and training initiatives were more inclined to access and participate in shed-type programs. While our research focused deliberately and particularly on aspects of the informal learning experienced in and through the sheds, it recognised that learning was only one of several other important formal and informal purposes, functions and benefits. Hayes & Williamson (2007) have demonstrated other benefits from a health and wellbeing research paradigm.

Our research confirmed that men who participate in community men's sheds particularly enjoy and find benefits in the 'relaxed', 'friendly' and 'non-threatening' environment they create. Men had a tendency to be attracted to sheds because of the lack of compulsion associated with attending. Overwhelmingly, men spoke of 'mateship'¹, 'friendship' and opportunities to 'share' and 'talk' to each other as important and key benefits for them. A further, clear benefit was a sense of feeling more connected and supported by other men in the shed.

Another important benefit, identified in our data, is the strong sense of belonging and the opportunity to be accepted by and give back to the local community. This opportunity of 'giving back' was made possible through making and doing things for the local community such as making toys for local kindergartens or providing maintenance programs for

¹ *Mateship in Australia is seen and valued as a form of mutual equality, particularly between men.*

the local community. This 'reconnecting with community' function, embodied in Hayes & Williamson's (2007, pp.33-35) recommendations for best practice in men's sheds, has positive implications for men's general health and wellbeing. This factor is particularly important for the one half of men involved in community sheds who have no other connection to community (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007). Other health benefits were experienced more directly, such as through enhanced access to health services and health information provided to the men through shed-based activities and programs. Hayes & Williamson (2007, p.14) identified sheds as reducing men's social isolation and enhancing self-esteem, increasing access to information about health services as well as rebuilding relationships in society and the community.

What are the trends for future sheds?

We have found a great diversity in Australian community-based men's sheds consistent with their separate and different, grassroots origins and with men's changing social and health needs, particularly as they age and retire. There has been a very recent sharing of experiences through mentoring, national community shed conferences (in 2005 and 2007) as well as through research. We identify a particular potential for the careful development of specialised sheds specifically designed to match older, experienced tradesmen in mentoring relationships with school resisters. We have located a small number of 'landmark' sheds already experienced and operating in this field. We see the potential for the development of a quite different set of sheds to meet the needs of men in residential aged care, including for men with dementia, as developed and pioneered in South Australia by Professor Leon Earle and Keith Bettany through Alzheimer's Australia. There is a need for more research into the health and wellbeing benefits of sheds, to follow on the research by Hayes & Williamson (2007).

It is also important to recognise that many communities, particularly rural and remote Australian communities, already have organisations that function somewhat like men's sheds, in that they provide an invaluable, regular meeting place for older men including volunteers in communities of practice. These organisations in Australia and other developed countries particularly include fire and emergency services organisations and sporting clubs. What they lack, that community-based men's sheds provide, is the emphasis on men, and particularly the health and wellbeing of older men. Community men's sheds are particularly new and different in that they emphasise communities of men's practice that encourage masculinities that are neither negative towards women nor hegemonic. As we have identified in Golding, Foley, Kimberley and Brown, (2007):

Sheds (mainly for men) and [neighbourhood] houses (mainly for women) in community contexts are simultaneously both conservative and revolutionary. One on hand, they both reinforce the status quo of gender stereotypical roles. On the other hand, they are revolutionary in that they both draw lines in the gender sand and recognise there are times and places where some women and some men benefit from gender-specific communities of practice.

As a team we are interested and actively involved in looking and learning, through our research in other countries, at what is being done and what might be done that is positive and transferable from Australian shed-based practice. While personal 'men's sheds' may not be as culturally iconic for men in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland as they are in Australia, they are certainly places that many highly value and where many men not in work are to be found. It is clear already from Barry Golding's research reconnaissance that many men, particularly men not in paid work in developed nations, are also experiencing social isolation, poor health, substance abuse, early death and suicide.

We observe and predict both the positive and negative effects of

research, including our own, into men's sheds as an emerging 'sector'. On the positive side, the publicity associated with this research, as well as from sharing of practitioner knowledge and experience in national men's sheds conferences since 2005 (see www.mensshed.org), has assisted shed stakeholders to gain a wider, national perspective and a better knowledge of the benefits of sheds to diverse groups of men. It also provides governments with valuable, hard evidence of their efficacy for particular sub-groups of men and the likely, future incorporation of community-based men's sheds into public policy (related particularly to men's health, learning and wellbeing) - and the valuable funding that can (and is) following. For example, the State government in Victoria is funding the support of around 20 new and existing community sheds in 2007.

However we also recognise that such support raises the possibility of future dependence on government funding, intervention and control over this new sector - which we predict will always be heavily reliant on volunteers and particularly on grassroots, community involvement and collaboration. The reality is that the embryonic Australian community shed 'sector' runs largely on social capital (trust, reciprocity, networks, collaboration, and shared norms) and struggles to create workshops that are safely equipped and supervised by coordinators and volunteers. There will be inevitable, future tensions between men's sheds as a successful dispersed, informal, grassroots activity and between possible future government, commercial and therapeutic support and intervention. These tensions are being managed through emerging national, state and regional shed networks as well as through attention to desirable best practices (Hayes & Williamson, 2007; Donnelly & Van Herk, 2007).

It is pertinent to note that the very small number of sheds in Australia built from scratch for men with government funding have initially found it difficult to attract men. In several senses, men and communities learn as much from the difficult journey of setting up shed-based organisations as they do from the destination: having a shed and keeping it running smoothly. For that reason, the active involvement of a group of men who

will use the community shed should ideally precede the shed planning and construction. While we strongly support and welcome the involvement of governments in assisting community-based men's sheds, the money will always be most effective if it takes account of what men most need and want in that locality - which will not be the same everywhere, nor the same for all men.

It is important, finally, to recognise that the number of men served by existing community sheds in Australia remains very small compared with the increasing number and proportion of older and retired men who are experiencing isolation and problems with their health and wellbeing. There are some men for whom sheds are not the answer. Sheds will always work best for men who enjoy hands on, regular activity in communities of men's practice. This will always work best if they enhance and collaborate with other community and government-funded organisations and services.

Conclusion

On the surface, our story is mainly about older men coming together regularly as friends, to make things in sheds in community settings. In reality, the community shed phenomenon and its diversity across Australia, particularly in this early growth and proliferation phase, is neither easy nor desirable to describe simply. Grassroots, shed practice by older, retired men lies towards the edge of conventional fields of academic and vocational inquiry, that tend to emphasise, study and value formal, accredited learning, knowledge and service provision of particular relevance to paid work. While men's health, education and wellbeing are important aims and outcomes of sheds in community contexts, their success appears, to us, to lie in their ability to enable men to learn more about themselves, stay happy and connected to the community and make friends, through regular activity in communities of shared practice. The difficult and continuing balancing act will be to

respect, value and include men wherever they have come from. It is essential also not to patronise men from a deficit model while simultaneously recognising the likelihood of some men's social, economic and cultural disadvantage.

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