

Shedding some new light on gender: evidence about men's informal learning preferences from Australian men's sheds in community contexts

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Introduction: Our rationale for studying men 'coming out' with other men

Grassroots, shed-based organisations largely for older men have spread rapidly and widely across Australia over the past decade to the point that around 150 such community sheds were open in early 2007. While these organisations are Australian, our interest in them stems from our research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson, 2007) into the wider potential for shed-based activity in masculine spaces to benefit other men and inform men's learning pedagogy and practice. Our aim is to provide evidence of our contention that grassroots, shed-based organisations and practice have the potential to informally and effectively reach, teach and support economically inactive, socially isolated and retired men by building on positive aspects of their masculinities. We draw some tantalising parallels between the genesis of community and neighbourhood 'houses' as feminised spaces mainly for women, and the recent genesis of community 'sheds' mainly for men.

Our research is about some gender implications of men's shed-based practice and informal learning in community contexts and organisations. While our research is not about backyard sheds, it is important for an international audience to first identify the traditional attraction and iconic status backyard sheds have had for many Australian men. The work shed and garage have been seen in several countries with English cultural connections (Thomson, 1996 in Australia; Hopkins, 1999 in New Zealand; Thorburn, 2002 in UK) as a place where men can retreat from the house. There they tend to tinker, usually alone, to make and fix things and shape the environment to their own needs. Men's own sheds have been seen as counterpoints to the domestic home and kitchen that have traditionally been construed in many western cultures as largely feminised, women's spaces. While the masculinist nature of these personal, backyard sheds has been celebrated in popular, particularly working class masculine discourses cited above, they have also been identified as having the potential to isolate men socially from friends and family and to further emphasise domestic sex role stereotypes.

Consistent with the male mythology about domestic sheds being mostly for men, community sheds are mainly accessible to, and used by, men. Because they are embedded in and auspiced mainly through community-based organisations we tend to refer to them in our research as *men's sheds in community contexts*. Throughout this paper, for simplicity, we will henceforth refer to community-based men's shed organisations as men's sheds or simply sheds. While some shed organisations are open to and welcoming of women, 96 per cent of men

surveyed in our national study agreed that 'this men's shed's members are mainly men'. What they have in common is that they are invariably called 'sheds', have men as the main participants and retain the workshop as the focus of the hands-on activity.

Our interest in shed practice derives from Golding's extensive Australian research into men's informal learning in community contexts. That research has identified the desirability of practical, hands on (and wherever possible, outside) activity with other men as volunteers in the fire shed (Hayes, Golding and Harvey, 2004). Learning informally was found by Golding and Rogers (2001) to be critically important to men's networking and informal learning in small and remote Australian towns. Such practical and informal learning is particularly attractive to working class men, tradespeople, farmers and retirees, many of whom share negative recollections of formal learning at school. Discourses about men's benefits from community involvement as volunteers is also consistent with recent discourses in the UK (LSC, 2004) about the benefits of Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL). Our interest also derives from our recognition, again from research (Golding and Rogers, 2001), that adult and community education tends through its feminist pedagogies tends not to include men and sometimes to exclude them (McGivney, 1999).

Golding et al (2007) showed that older, mostly working class, men are attracted to notions of the shed as a place they feel at home with other men. While we can be criticised for reinforcing male stereotypes by countenancing community sheds as places mainly or exclusively for men, we persist because of our overwhelming evidence of the wider benefits of that participation. What is new and different about community-based sheds is that men are positively 'coming out' of their backyard sheds and homes to learn and share hands-on activity with other men for positive reasons. Our research has shown little evidence in these sheds of negative or hegemonic masculinities (Golding et al, 2007) and a raft of therapeutic outcomes in terms of men's identities, health, happiness, social connections and wellbeing. These findings encourage us to persist.

Method

Our research is based on site-taped interviews and survey (N=211, 70.6% response) from a sample of 24 of approximately 125 active community-based men's sheds in five Australian states in 2006. The detailed methodology and broader findings from our study are reported in Golding et al (2007). Our research concentrated on the informal learning-related aspects of these sheds for men who participate, but included interviews with shed coordinators that also included women.

Golding, Harvey and Echter (2005) directly compared men's involvement in five different community-based organisations in 20 small rural towns. They concluded that informal learning through active voluntary involvement in community-based surrogate learning organisations (including football clubs, senior citizens and fire brigades) was more effective for men than participation by men in ACE programs. This counter-intuitive finding prompted adoption of research

methodologies in our shed-based research that presupposed situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Rather than researching 'enrolment' in 'courses', men's sheds participation was treated as involvement in a community of practice. The learning that was studied was informal, socially constructed, interwoven within the community of practice and the negotiated processes of membership and participation. Men's participation was anticipated as way of belonging, where belonging is '... not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constituent element of its content.' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 35).

Findings from the literature and our research

A brief snapshot of men who use sheds and why

Golding et al (2007) reviewed the small amount of previous research on men's sheds in community contexts including Hayes and Williamson (2006) and painted a comprehensive 'average' picture of men who use them. The median age of men who use men's sheds is 65 years, making half of the men older than the traditional retirement age. Three quarters were on some form of pension and four out of ten were not living with a wife or partner. In the past five years, one half had experienced retirement, one half had experienced a major health crisis, and one quarter had experienced some form of significant loss. One half had no other community membership or affiliation. Most had relatively limited and negative school and post-school experiences though four out of ten were former tradesmen. In summary, sheds attract men who tend not to be found in adult and community education and who are difficult to reach through community based education, health and wellbeing programs.

While 'shedlessness' is one factor attracting men to community-based sheds, friendship, the lack of compulsion, opportunities for mentoring and the sociability are most attractive. Men consistently report a strong sense of belonging, improved health and wellbeing. Men particularly enjoy the opportunity to 'get out of the house' and feel at home in the shed. Men with partners consistently talked about the need in retirement for both partners to avoid being 'underfoot' at home and to establish and develop new friendships and networks with other men.

Locating the sheds and the reasons for their genesis

Golding et al. (2007) mapped the distribution of the 150 shed organisations in Australia to late 2006. While we recognised that the first shed organisations began in widely separate locations and states and tended to proliferate from those original sites, we were previously unable to adequately account for their observed distribution pattern. The publication of data on the distribution of economically inactive men (Lattimer, 2007, 71-6) in early 2007 leads us to suggest that their distribution is specifically related to regions of higher than average percentages of men not in work. Our shed distribution map corresponds reasonably closely to regions, suburbs and towns in mainly southern Australia where the proportions of prime age (35-45 years) and older (65+ years) men exceed 12 per cent and 85 per cent respectively. Lattimore suggested that the observed spatial patterns of economically inactive men of working age 'are not merely random variations in inactivity rates of particular age groups, but reflect systemic factors shaping the location of prime aged males outside of the labour force' (p.75). We contend similarly that the distribution of community based

men's sheds is non-random and indicative of an underlying grassroots need in particular widely separated communities for a place for men to go who are not working, prime age or not. We further conclude that sheds have sprung up first and most actively in Australia in areas where former tradesmen tend to congregate and/or have tended in their previous paid work to work hands-on in groups with other men in factories, workshops and mines.

Discussion: Drifting into contested gendered terrain

The question of whether and why men need a place of their own is an important one in terms of gender politics. We recognize that men's sheds, like men's groups, are distinctively different from other community organisations in which men congregate. Their identity in sheds 'is first and foremost as men' (Pease, 2002, 33) providing men with the context to forge new, positive and effective practical links between men and masculinity. These links are particularly important for men whose need for affirmation of masculinity through work makes them more vulnerable to the consequences of employment and unemployment, disability, separation and retirement. Men's sheds give licence for older men to come together and positively experience and reconstruct their masculinity, without the negative repercussions of traditional patterns of aggressive behaviour. Golding et al (2007) have concluded that very few aspects of the negative and stereotypical forms of masculinity carried over into shed practice, but also that involvement by men in sheds typically has positive benefits for the men, their partners, children and extended families.

By virtue of our focus on equity for some groups of men, we drift into what Rowan et al (2002, 5) describe as 'dangerous or hostile terrain'. To avoid misinterpretation, we make three important points. Firstly, we acknowledge and support adult and community education (ACE) in Australia as a site of positive, feminising practice (after Connell, 1996 and Lingard and Douglas, 1999, 118). Secondly, we recognise that much can and should be done within ACE to encourage more men to more equitably participate and learn alongside women (eg LCL 2004, 12-14; Golding, Brown and Naufal, 2006). Thirdly, we recognise that men's sheds have the potential to provide new and different opportunities for men to affirm and share other positive aspects of their masculinity, and to learn informally in the process.

The fact that women clearly outnumber men as learners in most adult and community learning organisations (Golding, Davies and Volkoff, 2001) has been widely considered normal and unproblematic despite its obvious inequity. LCL (2004) identified difficulties attracting men to Western Australian community neighbourhood and learning centres, noting that they are generally perceived by men as 'a women's thing', having been created 'as a response to the educational needs of women and ... established by women' (p.8). McGivney (1999) has argued that while men tend to earn, women tend to learn: 'Learning is seen by men as an unacceptable form of vulnerability' (p.68) and 'something that children, retired people or women do.' (p.65). McGivney (2004, 65) suggested that adult males learners can '... lose face and standing with their peers if they depart from the established norms of male behaviour' and unlike 'real' men

engage as adults in learning'. Similarly to Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004, 36), Bull and Anstey (1995, 9) found that

... in many rural communities literacy, as it is traditionally defined was seen more as 'women's work'. Conversely men generally saw literacy in more functional terms in order to complete tasks or to augment work.

There is a concern from some quarters that research which identifies men's disadvantage might take the focus off funding or support for programs to address women's disadvantage, still experienced by women in terms of participation in - and particularly outcomes from - education and training more broadly. Feminists, particularly, counter suggestions of simple sectoral *exclusion* of men from adult education and training, implied in the title of McGivney's (1999) *Excluded Men* in the UK, but more nuanced on a careful reading of that work. McGivney in fact says that some of the 'missing' men

... are not deliberately avoiding education: they are systematically excluded from it by employers, education institutions and the system governing programmes and welfare benefits for the unemployed. (McGivney, 1999, 70)

In the past, the question about how feminist researchers feel and interpolate researching masculinities was dealt with by setting out the arguments as to why they should be concerning themselves with male attitudes, behaviours and so on (Cain, 1986). Nowadays research is undertaken looking at masculinities in specific settings by feminist commentators along with pro-feminist men (Skelton, 1998). Perhaps a more useful way to view our research is by borrowing aspects of theorisation of inclusion/exclusion in ACE. This allows us to ask the question: 'What else might we be doing to identify and include groups such as older men who benefit from community-based settings that are different from what can be perceived as feminist settings?' (Graham and Slee, 2005).

Reasons for persisting with men's sheds

There are a number of good reasons from our research 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, 4). Flood suggests 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'. Berkowitz (2004, 3), for example, found that workshop activities with men 'are more effective when conducted in small, all male groups because of the immense influence that men have on each other and because of the safety all male groups can provide'. Flood (2005, 9) defends the use of all-male groups for three reasons.

First, men's attitudes and behaviour are shaped in powerful ways by their male peers ... and this male-male influence can be harnessed for positive ends (Berkowitz 2004, 4). Second all-male groups can provide the space and safety for men to talk. Third, working in single-

sex groups minimises the harmful, gendered forms of interaction that are common in mixed-sex groups. Men may look to women for approval, forgiveness and support and women may adopt nurturing or caretaking roles for men. Flood

While Flood cautions that 'all male groups do involve greater risk of men's collusion with sexism and violence, and this must be minimised', he identifies several good reasons to use men as facilitators and peer educators in gender-based work with men. They are that 'male educators tend to be perceived as more credible and persuasive'; that 'male educators can act as role models for men'; and that 'having men work with men embodies the recognition that men must take responsibility for helping to end gender inequality, rather than leaving it up to women'. It is also important, as Hayes and Williamson (2006, 8) observe, to recognise that while some men do face problems, and that some of these men can and do cause problems for themselves and others, it is important for women not to see men as *the* problem 'because they are men'. It is also important, as Hayes and Williamson (2006, 9) note, to recognise that community-based sheds, unlike some backyard sheds, 'are not places men go to get away from people. They go to Sheds specifically to be with other men.'

Recognising the positive role of women in sheds

In this study of men's sheds it is also important to identify and anticipate the positive role of women – as participants in some sheds but also as shed coordinators and managers, typically co-facilitating with men and almost invariably responsible for procuring and managing the externally sought funds. We also note the overwhelming evidence of strong support and active encouragement by the wives and partners of men who participate. Flood (2005, 10) notes that 'female facilitators can also work very effectively with men, and there are benefits of women and men working together'. Berkowitz (2004, 4) also suggests that it is 'beneficial for men to see women and men co-facilitating in a respectful partnership'. In both Australia and the UK there is a sense of frustration – particularly amongst women – at their inability to 'reach' men through adult education in particular.

There is a growing recognition, summarised in UK contexts by McGivney (1999, 69), that since 'adult community education is seen as a service for women [it] consequently has a limited appeal for men', partly because 'they are mostly staffed by women'. As Tett (1994) identified, 'many adult and community education programmes are designed to help women gain new interests and achieve personal goals [and] therefore do not attract men who have a more instrumental attitude to learning' (McGivney 1999, 69).

Conclusion

We have used survey and narrative data from community based 'men's sheds' in Australia to investigate some gender issues associated with men's informal learning. Our data, collected from the perspective of men who participate in these shed-based grassroots organisations, provide new insights into some of the

attitudes older men have to learning with or separately from women. We have drawn a number of conclusions about men's informal learning preferences in community contexts, the gendered nature of those preferences and men's aversion to some forms of adult and community education (ACE). We have also made some important distinctions between masculinities practiced by men who use community-based men's sheds and traditional and largely negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Our underlying argument, is 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. 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.

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