



'They're funny bloody cattle': encouraging rural men to learn

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Our paper examines and analyses the contexts and organisations in rural and regional communities that informally and effectively encourage men to learn. It is based on a combination of local, rural adult education practice and a suite of studies in Australia and elsewhere of learning in community contexts, most recently into community-based men's sheds. It is underpinned by both experience and research evidence that many rural men tend to have an aversion to formal learning. The intention of our paper and its specific, practical conclusions and recommendations is to focus on and share positive and practical ways, demonstrated through practice and validated through research, of encouraging rural men to learn.

Preface

Our paper is written collaboratively by a learning centre coordinator and practitioner (Soapy Vallance) from a rural Victorian town (Donald), and a researcher in adult and community education (Barry Golding) based at University of Ballarat, a regional Victorian university. We have structured our paper with separate but related sections written from our respective positions as a practitioner (Soapy) and a researcher (Barry).

The paper is one of several longer-term outcomes of two Research Circles into *Encouraging men's learning* funded through the Adult, Community and Further Education Board in 2005–6 through University of Ballarat, with Mike Brown and Annette Foley and coordinated by Rowena Naufal.

A man will travel miles to buy a good sheep dog, but he won't walk across the road to learn how to breed one (Vallance 2007)

Men earn, women learn (McGivney 2004)

Introduction

Our paper completes Research Circles for us in several important senses. While we were both born and schooled in Donald and still have families there, our adult working, learning and research paths have only crossed relatively recently. What we share is our concern for the well-being and learning of rural men. Our particular concern is about rural men's general reluctance not to participate in formal learning. Our paper essentially deals with the factors that tend to turn men off – and also turn them on – to learning.

What turns rural men off learning?

Soapy

My Research Circle paper (Vallance 2007) was called 'They are funny bloody cattle: study into attracting men into learning'. My idea of

rural men as 'funny bloody cattle' is based on my observation and experience that men's reactions to learning opportunities are easier to address from the view of the 'herd' rather than from the perspective of the individual 'bull'. I observe that while individual men can seldom be deliberately 'herded' to learn formally, their group learning behaviour is more predictable. If you follow where men instinctively 'graze' to, you get a good idea about how they might be gently guided, as a group, into other productive learning paddocks and pastures.

There is a limited range of formal learning venues and options available for rural men, compared with those of their city brothers. Even when formal venues *are* available, rural men tend not to gravitate to them. The available learning and training settings in country towns other than neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Australia tend to be found in halls, workplaces, fire stations, football sheds, community men's sheds and anywhere that does not resemble a school or classroom environment. Older rural men typically had quite negative experiences of formal education and left school relatively early and therefore tend to steer clear of more formal settings.

Recollections of bad experiences of school are therefore a major reason that many men will not go back to learning, especially in a formal situation located in a school or classroom. These bad experiences have carved scars into young minds that often last a lifetime. Sadly, these negative experiences are still prevalent for many rural boys in today's schools. Then, as now, the ability to pay for an education (or more recently, the ability to pay back the higher education debt) discriminates against people with the lowest incomes and the most limited access to formal literacies, including information and computer technologies (ICT). So the cycle goes round and often spans generations in the same family.

Men will more readily learn informally, in groups, as opposed to going it alone. As for women, some of the most valuable life skills

people learn are learnt informally through trial and error, interaction and experience, through involvement at home, work and in the community. Men tend to learn best when they know they're not doing it. Men learn effectively and informally by working side by side: from one another, in sheds and workshops, outside, through field days, on work sites, in the workplace and in groups – wherever men gather regularly. Many farmers say they learn by looking over the next farmer's fence.

A major amount of men's learning is done through hands-on experience. It is older men with negative and limited experiences of formal learning that are less threatened or intimidated by hands-on learning. The hands-on method allows them to control the rate of learning and when they do it. Hands-on, community projects are very effective and a painless way of getting men involved in their community and back into learning. They provide a sense of belonging, friendships and social connectedness for men who might otherwise have had no regular contact with other people within their community. Importantly, they treat men as part of the solution to the problems men face, rather than men as *the* problem.

Barry

Given the relatively low proportion of older men involved in formal learning in rural communities, I have tended to focus my research on where learning *does* take place informally in rural areas, in spite of, and in part because of the formality that Soapy talks about. My particular and recent research interest has been on what informal learning men experience in groups in community organisations and settings. My research with colleagues through the University of Ballarat has identified the particular importance to Australian rural men of learning experiences available through regular, hands-on practice and involvement. Aside from adult and community education (ACE), these experiences are particularly important for rural men in Australia through land care, sporting and senior citizens clubs

(Golding & Rogers 2002), voluntary fire and emergency service organisations (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2003), and more recently in some parts of southern Australia, through men's sheds in community contexts (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007). I have a particular interest in where rural men are learning informally, in part because of their more limited access to formal learning organisations found in larger cities (Golding 2006).

I acknowledge from the outset the academic and theoretical limitations of characterising and stereotyping **all** rural people and their learning preferences by gender or age on the basis of statistics and averages. Men and women, people generally and rural communities have diverse and different interests and needs over the lifespan. However, I am also concerned about ignoring evidence of continuing inter-generational inequity by location and gender. Men's participation in adult and community education has been significantly less than for women in Australia for over 50 years. I am particularly concerned about what is being repeated for many young rural people, particularly young men, as a consequence of their significantly different post-secondary learning destinations away from Australian capital cities. As an illustration, in Victoria in 2006 (CEP 2007), around half as many 18 year olds in the Wimmera-Mallee area of rural Victoria (where Soapy lives) were enrolled in a post-secondary course as in the capital city, Melbourne. In both Melbourne *and* the Wimmera-Mallee areas, approximately half as many male 18 year olds enrolled in a post-secondary course as did 18 year old women¹.

Men who have stayed and worked in Australian rural towns have tended, over generations, not to undertake higher levels of formal education that lead to professions. The majority of professional roles in rural communities: in education, nursing, aged care, welfare and local government administration have tended to be occupied

1 Post-secondary enrolments of 18 year olds from Melbourne: 62.0% male, 80.4% female; in Wimmera-Mallee: 21.8% male, 42.4% female.

by women. This tendency has been exacerbated by the need, during the ongoing drought caused by climate change, in 2007 affecting two-thirds of agricultural areas in Australia, for people on farms, particularly women, to learn new skills, commute (Devers 2007) and work off farm. In broadacre agricultural areas in Australia, over 60 per cent of farm income is now generated off farm.

The formality of learning – and also the extent to which it is mediated by and dependent on access to information and computer technology (ICT) – increases with the perceived status of the education sector. As formality and the required technological literacy levels increase, older rural men tend to be excluded from participating. The ‘highest’ and most diverse forms of education are most accessible in Australia’s biggest cities where levels of participation typically are significantly higher. The cost of travelling and moving to larger towns to study is beyond many rural people. The highest academic and economic value is placed on the most abstract knowledge in the most formal classroom settings. Hands-on skills learned in rural communities over generations of practice tend to have lower status and currency unless they are accompanied by certification – which rural men tend not to have.

Given the high value governments now place on training for industry, competency-based vocational education and training (VET) is more heavily subsidised by governments than other forms of education. While some rural VET programs are available through adult and community education (ACE), the diverse range of programs are typically only available through larger regional, city-based, technical and further education (TAFE) institutes or by fee-for-service through private registered training organisations (RTOs). The main pathways between school, ACE, VET and higher education sectors are construed as being upward in this hierarchy. Non-vocational, non-accredited learning in ACE centres and neighbourhood houses is regarded as close to the bottom of the hierarchy and is increasingly user-pays,

putting it further out of reach of rural people struggling with drought. Many of these factors of formality and cost apply to both men and women.

What entices rural men to learn?

Soapy

As coordinator for eleven years in the Donald Neighbourhood House and recently, of the Donald Men's Shed, I am in a good position to summarise a few things that I've noticed that entice men back to learn. The new technologies men face in work and in retirement at home is certainly an important one, The daily tasks like banking, checking the news and weather, sending and receiving messages and getting information like market prices are increasingly dependent on having access to a computer and being on-line. Children and women in rural families have tended to learn and develop these skills first and to a higher level. For older people, the need to keep contact with children and grandchildren can be a positive 'hook' to entice them to learn how to email and use a mobile phone. Men without children or a partner are understandably completely adrift and often don't know where to begin.

For all of their bravado (and in part because of it), men are reluctant to join clubs and organisations on their own. Men feel less threatened by signing up to a group to share tasks with other men. They are much more likely to join organisations that build on and value their existing friendships, skills and interests. This is where community-based men's sheds come in. All older men have a lifetime rich in skills, interests and experiences. These 'men of experience' mentor and learn informally with and from other men.

Men earn, women learn

Soapy

On the front of this paper I have said that: "A man will travel miles to buy a good sheep dog, but he won't walk across the road to learn

how to breed one." My point is that men's pride often causes them to go out of their way *not* to do what logic suggests they *should* do when faced with a tight situation. With more limited friendship networks than women, many rural men who have worked largely in their own in small businesses and farms find themselves isolated in retirement and unable to roll with the difficulties and changes that life tends to throw up with age, and particularly with unemployment and retirement. These difficulties can include sickness, disability, loss of income, family home, partner, farm, mobility and shed or workshop. While men have more time in retirement, they are even less likely than when they were working to present for learning for learning's sake. There has to be a key to draw them in informally.

One of the important keys is regular, hands-on activity and friendships with other men. Any adult without regular contact with other people or the community in which they live is in a difficult, lonely and potentially dangerous and debilitating situation. It is important that we acknowledge and tap into the experience and wisdom of people towards the end of previously active and proud working and community lives. The starting point is to find a way of acknowledging and informally sharing what men already know, rather than teaching them what they don't know. This is where men's sheds come in.

Barry

I have previously written that, when rural men are up against it, they tend instinctively to work harder at the same thing, sometimes in a desperate and futile way, in order to save face. In the context of a widespread and prolonged drought in most parts of southern Australia, many farmers are resolved to 'stick it out' and wait for better times, since the option of leaving the land, their communities and extended families is an admission of defeat. Tragically, but not surprisingly, the rates of suicide for rural men are extremely high.

What we know from Australian research about men's aversion to formal learning as adults has been observed elsewhere. McGivney (2004, p.1) concluded that, in the United Kingdom,

... a major block to participation was the belief, held by many, especially working-class men, that involvement in learning after the age of 25 would involve a loss of face ('a step up for women and a step down for men', as one respondent to a survey put it). There was also evidence of a widely held belief that only work or career-related learning was relevant for men. The title of [McGivney's 2007 book] *Men earn, women learn*, encapsulates this view which is apparently held by a large section of the population.

What is it about men's sheds?

Soapy

I reckon that community men's sheds are probably the best tool available for getting men reconnected to the community and back to learning and living. Our shed has involved men in a heap of valuable community projects. In the past many of these men have just sat around home with little to do apart from dodging the rolling pin. The shed has given them a whole new outlook on life and a much brighter future.

Mateship has developed between men that would not normally have crossed paths on a regular basis, had they not been involved in one of the shed's projects. When someone is absent for any length of time, the other shed members become concerned about their well-being. They have, in effect, become a big community family. They quickly develop a sense of belonging to the men's shed and the projects they work on. Members seek out other members, promote the shed to the local community and are always on the lookout for potential new shed projects.

The shed has become a great place for skills transfer, with members mentoring each other as they work together on community projects.

They teach each other new skills like welding, woodworking, painting and mechanical skills. They learn skills from tradesmen as they work on projects in groups. The shed members are constantly on the lookout for members of the community with skills that can be passed on through the shed. Our experience so far is that around one half of men have gone on to other learning or training outside and beyond the shed. For some, it is computer courses. The projects men get involved in allow them to learn as part of a group, but to work also on individual projects when they feel comfortable

One of the most remarkable, informal benefits our shed has produced is men's improved knowledge of their health. Some of it is through health sessions, but most of it is through informal interaction and discussion between themselves about their own conditions and symptoms. In several instances, men have gone to their doctors as a direct consequence. Men's involvement in the shed has led to improvements in men's well-being, health and happiness, as observed by men's wives and families. Men have become more settled and their anxiety conditions have improved dramatically. We have many instances of improved mental health for men who have recently retired, been widowed, retrenched or moved off farms due to drought and illness or who have experienced long term unemployment. Many of these men have been positively and permanently reconnected to their community as a direct consequence of participation in the community men's shed.

Barry

Community-based men's sheds are particularly important for men not in paid work. However, they don't work for all men. Not all men are attracted to the idea of socialising and learning informally in a community-based workshop setting. While those who *are* attracted come for a wide range of reasons and from very diverse situations, Golding, Foley and Brown (2007, p. 5) suggest that men 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 the day-to-day running and management of the shed. 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 shed they are in a strong position to mentor, learn from and socialise with other men and give back to the community.

The second 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 informally new skills and, like the other group, to contribute positively to the community. Men in this situation tend, on average, to be younger than retirement age, have had less shed-based previous experience, less current access to a shed at home, and most importantly, have had much more difficult lives. These difficulties sometimes include one or more of limited and negative experiences of education and training (particularly school), periods of unemployment, separation from partners and children, substance abuse and disability. Importantly, men who live alone, including the higher proportion of single men subject to a range of other social and health problems, are also significantly less comfortable about sharing the shed with women than are men with partners.

Why can't sheds complement neighbourhood houses?

Soapy

We've proved in Donald that they can. The Men's Shed is auspiced through the Neighbourhood House. Men who come to the shed are basically part of the 'House' and know they are welcome to come to it when they are ready. The legal liability, safety, administrative and financial parts of a men's shed organisation that are a hurdle for many groups wanting to set up a shed are relatively simply handled through an existing incorporated association, in our case the Neighbourhood House.

Barry

It is likely that existing links between neighbourhood houses and learning centres and community-based men's sheds in Australia will strengthen as men's sheds become better known and understood in each State and Territory. There have been positive collaborations already in Victoria (where the Australian Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre peak body is based) and Tasmania (where the Neighbourhood House sector played an important role in the 2006 Tasmanian Men's Sheds Conference organised through Pete's Shed in Bridgewater). There is considerable interest in community sheds from Learning Centre Link in Western Australia that includes many neighbourhood houses in its network.

There are some tantalising parallels between the development of neighbourhood houses, primarily for women, since the mid-1970s, and the recent, rapid growth of community men's sheds in Australia. Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown (2007) in their paper, 'Houses and sheds', have identified some parallels and differences. Their paper focuses on some of the complex, strategic political choices that have been made around gender in neighbourhood houses since the 1970s and in men's sheds very recently. One choice is to be overtly gender specific (discriminatory) and therefore have neighbourhood houses

for women and sheds for men. A second choice is to be gender neutral and de-emphasise gender as part of an inclusive politics. The naming of a house as a neighbourhood house and a shed as a community shed would reflect this second position. These choices can be paramount when consequent educational decisions and strategies are developed relating to the design and establishment of learning environments, pedagogies and programs conducive for women, men or both.

Conclusion

Soapy & Barry

We have, as a conclusion, some recommendations to offer as a guide for other people and communities who want to get men more involved in learning. They are based on our respective experiences as an adult learning practitioner and researcher. For a start, avoid trying to 'teach' men as individuals, particularly older men, without acknowledging what they already know and can share in groups. Learning is most effective in groups as well as by working with and through other community organisations where men already gather, such as football clubs and fire brigades, and very recently, through community men's sheds. It is not enough to second guess what men want, put it on a learning centre program and expect men to walk in the door. It is very likely they won't.

It is important to recognise that the number of men served by existing community sheds remains very small compared with the increasing number and proportion of men who are experiencing isolation and problems with their health and well-being. If you see the potential for starting a community men's shed, find out where the closest one is (see the Australian Men's Sheds Association list on www.mensshed.org). Go and have a talk to someone who has already set one up, and if possible visit several sheds to get an idea of the different possibilities. Get information from the previous national men's sheds conferences via the same website and obtain a copy of the guide

to *Setting up a men's shed* (Donnelly & Van Herk 2007). Not all sheds will be the same and it is likely your local one will need to be different again. What happens in the shed, what is made and which organisation or sites it should be auspiced through should be decided by the men, who will use the shed in close consultation with your local community. Anticipate problems and difficulties finding a safe and secure site, but the men you gather will gladly do most of the work – and learn much from the process.

Once you are set up, make sure that there are agreed safe routines and rules. It is essential that someone is responsible and sensitive to individual and group needs at all times that the shed is open. Remember that there are some men for whom sheds are not the answer. Sheds will work well for men not in paid work who enjoy (and probably miss) opportunities to develop friendships through hands-on, regular, workshop-based activity with other men. As for women, learning opportunities will be maximised for men in all adult learning organisations if they listen to and take account of men's diverse needs at different ages and stages, and if they enhance and collaborate with other community and government-funded organisations and services.

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Barry Golding's and Soapy Vallance's lives and work trajectories have recently intersected, in research and practice respectively, at the Donald Men's Shed. Barry, with family roots in Donald, is introduced in a parallel journal article. Soapy, as the Coordinator of the Donald Learning Group, is also a key figure in the development of the associated community men's shed and a respected mentor to many other shed-based organisations in north-western Victoria. We attempt, in the dialogue of our narrative, to share our contention about the value of researcher and practitioner collaboration and the importance of valuing people, practitioners and place in learning and research narratives.

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