

A long and winding road: autonomous men's learning through participation in community sheds across Australia

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Introduction

This paper discusses aspects of men's learning derived from our study of mostly older men who are coming together, talking, working and socialising in community sheds across Australia (Golding *et al.*, 2007). The paper looks at the social, informal and autonomous learning and considers the significance of the community 'work-like' settings. Mentoring, coaching, 'sitting next to George' and 'hanging out on the periphery', are common forms of social pedagogical interaction in these contexts, as are, group discussion, conversations and low-key questioning. In this paper the mostly older men's learning is analysed as a subset of lifelong learning.

The participants in the study are mostly older men, some retired, some recovering from illness or injury, others unable to find full-time paid work. However all share a social space and an undefined but common purpose that due to aging bodies and faculties is sometimes illusory, as much as real, but that is loosely focused around regular, hands-on participation in traditional, male-orientated, goal-directed activities. Considered highly significant to participation in the learning and group activities, is the development of male friendships referred to as 'mateship' amongst men in Australia. These friendships develop through participation and inclusion in activity that occurs in social and community spaces. Our research shows that access to, and inclusion in these male-orientated group spaces, provides an avenue for the development of friendships, trust, support and reciprocity. Through our research we found that the associated learning and life-stage development that occurs in these environments leads to self-reported improvements in happiness, health and well-being, and feelings of social connection.

The participants in our study are generally considered to be a missing group or cohort in adult education. Consequently this paper addresses the first theme of the conference on 'participation in adult education and learning'. It also picks up on the trend that we observe in Australia and which is alluded to in one of the contextual statements for the conference about 'a remarkable explosion in individualized, self-directed and autonomous forms of learning that have occurred without involving adult educators'. Considered central to our study were the places, spaces and faces. Unique to this paper is the critical discussion of the significance of the social space and its resemblance to a 'work-like' space. The theoretical concepts of alienation and hegemony are brought to the analysis and interpretation.

Lifelong learning

Field and Leicester (2000) acknowledge that the term lifelong learning is a description of learning that goes beyond school and formal education to suggest a learning process that spans the whole of one's life. They suggest that the term originates from policy discourse

and so has come to be associated with worthwhile learning and therefore most often used in an approving way. It is a learning that is considered worthwhile to the individual and to the society to which the individuals are a part. It is a form of learning where some of the informal aspects are facilitated by libraries, museums, art galleries, botanical gardens, motor, garden, leisure, and recreational shows, but also by reading books, newspapers, magazines, watching movies, and conversations with tourists, travelers, skilled artists, tradespeople and knowledgeable others. In effect lifelong learning is a kind of learning that has the potential to occur through most social interactions with others.

Lee in Longworth (2003) makes the point that while schools prepare students for the world, in particular for employment, a characteristic of lifelong learning is that the enormous emphasis on career and the world of work is excluded or at least marginalized. Instead critical areas such as the arts, citizenship and personal quality of life are more prominent. As Longworth suggests in its broadest sense learning is social, economic, political, personal, cultural, and educational. He also contends that learning means handing ownership of the learning over to the learner and not the teacher. This he argues involves a 180 degree shift of emphasis and power from the provider and teacher to the learner.

Jarvis (2006, pp.134) describes lifelong learning as 'the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person'. This definition emphasizes whole person body and mind learning in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

Hargreaves (2004) suggests that five themes can be associated with lifelong learning. The first of these involves a shift away from a content focus, and instead overtly focuses on learning as a process. Here individuals learn how they learn and therefore how to learn. Self-awareness and understanding of how individuals can learn is considered a means to equip learners for their futures. The second theme is the development of generic and hopefully transferable skills like problem-solving, negotiation, decision-making, communication and interpersonal skills. The third theme involves the pursuing of a project. Hargreaves emphasizes the authenticity involved in doing projects. There is also a relative sense of indeterminacy; of there being no one right way or means for achieving desired ends. Rather there are many paths to completion. The final two themes emphasized by Hargreaves are the importance of mentors and coaches rather than teachers. The fifth theme is personalization. This refers to the need to individualize the learning to the specific needs of the learners.

McGivney's (2004) in her book 'Men earn and women learn' work looks at the gender divide in adult learning and captures a significant focus. She looks at the gendered nature of adult learning provision and participation and suggests strategies for bridging the gender divide. She also considers the importance of building social capital and social connection. In addition, and like Findsen (2005), and Longworth (2003), McGivney talks about the need to include and encourage participation and to develop forms of active citizenship.

Probably one of the most powerful markers of what it means to be part of the developed world is that more people are now living longer and on average achieving older age. This

stage is described it as the third age of life. This third age can be further subdivided into the younger old people and the older old people. The former is often marked by calls for active recreation while the later is more about dealing with the onset of frailty and demise of agility and faculty leading to loss of independence and later to death. Findsen (2005) looks specifically at the learning of older learners, and puts forward a critical form of educational gerontology. In his work he utilizes critical theory to explore issues of justice and equality across boundaries of social class, gender and ethnicity.

In short, lifelong learning occurs over the whole of life including for older learners. It refers to the requirement of adapting to changing circumstances often associated to adjustments around health, mobility, employment, relationships, loss and living arrangements. In terms of understanding, it is possible that during this stage of life, while some understandings might come others may start to slip away. A significant aspect of lifelong learning for older learners is a tendency to shift inwardly and so meaning-making and episodes within life histories are visited and re-visited through reflection and self-reflection (Brown, 2007).

For some, learning is very social, and the mere fact of it being social, even by itself, means that it is contributing to the satisfying of needs. Friendship arises as a support to learning as learners are motivated to attend and interact as part of contributing and maintaining friendships. Mateship is by degree a powerful form of friendship and closeness that can develop between people, yet it can take a number of forms as explained in Edgar (1997). On the one hand, mates and mateship can refer to married couples and life partners. On the other hand, mateship can also refer to very close friendships - most commonly friendships between men. An example of the latter form is a mateship that is forged between soldiers who have endured the hardships, pain and suffering caused by war or others who may have a friendship forged through shared experiences of hardships and adversary.

Methodology

This paper builds upon research first reported at the 2007 SCRUTREA Conference on men's learning in community-based sheds across Australia (Golding *et al.*, 2007). Specifically this paper reports, analyses, and discusses data derived from surveys and interviews with the men in 25 community sheds across Australia throughout 2006. However it should be acknowledged that academic research can become problematic when researchers bring frameworks to bear on data and evidence that are outside the life world of the participants in the study. Recognizing this fact has meant that we as researchers have been careful and respectful of the participants in the study and have interpreted the data in a very naturalistic way. This naturalistic grounded approach has meant that we have remained with our data. This paper also attempts to be respectful to the participants but begins to step out of the interpretative paradigm and in academic terms is more critical. Some of the concepts used in the analytical and interpretative frames are borrowed from critical sociology.

The findings: who uses men's sheds and why?

Community sheds across Australia are catering for mostly older men. Typically, they are the size of a double or triple car garage. They support hands-on activity like woodwork, and metalwork with furniture making and mending, toy making and welding projects common. Some sheds have a recreation area with a pool table, a few lounge chairs. Most have a food, or at least a sink, and tea and coffee preparation area. Some have annexed outdoor space immediately adjacent to the shed for the location of a barbeque area and even a garden.

In terms of location, of the 180 sheds identified to be operating across Australia, it is interesting to note that almost all of these are to the south of the continent. With sheds most prominent in the states of South Australia and Tasmania but also in the southern end of Western Australia and Victoria. Significantly, the location of the sheds coincides with Lattimore's research for the Australian Productivity Commission. Lattimore (2007) identifies the geographical locations where large numbers of economically inactive men reside.

The main participants at sheds are mostly retired, unemployed or isolated older men who are outside the labour market and therefore considered to be economically inactive. In the study one half were found to be over 65 years of age, most were recently retired and others were involuntarily withdrawn from the workforce. Stories were collected from some men who experienced a kind of employment limbo. This included overt and covert age discrimination. One shedder recalled that while nothing was said to him directly by his manager at work he found that he was continually left off the work roster. Three out of four men were on some kind of pension, one in five was not able to secure paid work but hoped to do so, and one in five was a war veteran.

The role of life partners was an interesting aspect of the findings. Younger men who participated in shed activities tended to be single, and were amongst those hoping to return to the paid workforce in the future. Older retired men were more likely to be living with a partner and have experienced less significant recent changes to health, wellbeing, security and financial status than the younger men. Interestingly, we suspect that the retired older men who were receiving support and companionship from their life partners away from the shed are the same people who are supporting the younger single men at the shed who have experienced significant changes and disjuncture in their lives.

Participants at the shed refer to themselves as shedders. Shedders with life partners typically reported degrees of underfoot syndrome. This is where the newly retired person is spending much more time in the family home and with their partner to the degree that they get in one another's way and disrupting pre-retirement domestic routines. Amongst the shedders we interviewed and surveyed, one half have retired or had major health crisis in the last five years. One in three has been referred to the shed by a health or welfare worker and one half heard about the shed from a friend.

Of the over 65 year old shedders many did not have access to their own shed. Most go along to the shed for social reasons. The shedders reported friendship and companionship to be very important and wanted to share the company, space and activity of other men. It was interesting that one third of sheds were available to both men and women, one third welcomed women as visitors and one third wanted to be men only spaces.

Forty percent of shedders are former qualified tradesmen. These people often take on leadership roles in the learning process and are prominent in the running of the shed. Numerous shedders though also reported that they had worked in clerical, retail or even managerial roles and had not previously worked with their hands. Occupational health and safety is a significant focus of each and every shed. All are strict and enforce safe work practices. A number of the sheds told of running formal and informal programs for young and even school age learners. Some of these were school resistors and others were doing school-related programs. One group of shedders even talked about extending their mentoring role where they were 'assisting young people to make things' into a 'going

fishing on Sundays' program.

In terms of learning, men cited the lack of compulsion as important. Rather than teacher/learner relationships preferred instead doing projects and developing peer mentoring and coaching relationships with others. While one in four experienced some form of learning difficulties, three out of four men were interested in some kind of further learning through the shed. Most shedders reported limited success with education and learning at school, yet relished the opportunity to learn in informal ways at the shed. The preferred learning approaches reported by the shedders were for hands-on activity, in practical situations, and preferably in informal contexts. 'Sitting next to George' and/or initially observing from the periphery as with the community of practice model of learning was very common. Thirty percent have positive recollections of formal learning and 15 percent had attended some form of formal learning in the last year. Interestingly, very few sheds had any contact with any formal or paid adult educators, though most of the sheds had some form of supervisor whose work can be seen to have a significant educational component to it.

Work-like activities in work-like spaces

McGivney (2004) has shown that men tend to focus on their roles as earners rather than as learners. Through much of their lives their identities and self-worth is developed in association with their role as workers, and as providers. Often they participated in highly gendered paid work activities working alongside other men, using tools, equipment and processes that many considered gendered. In short, they often work, but not always, with other men, in highly segregated occupations. Many workplaces, and more accurately sections within workplaces, often take on gendered cultures and behaviors.

Superficially sheds as a space resemble paid workplaces. What is different is that they are ostensibly for older, retired, injured workers who like to make, mend and produce things. However there are some very notable differences. Some of these differences are significant and need to be pointed out. First there is a lack of compulsion at the shed. Shedders can choose to work as much as they like and go home when they like. Second, there is a negotiated and collaborative running of the sheds. Third, shedders like to do authentic, socially useful projects such as community maintenance, the making of toys, the mending of bikes and even the construction of makeshift wheelchairs for injured people as part of overseas aid programs.

There is a strong sense of reciprocity, shedders talk about 'giving back' to the community and in 'passing on' their skills to others. Similarly, they share brew, food, knowledge, effort and achievements with one another. They share common ground, doing things together and they talk. Some reflected and reported personal horror stories in their life histories prior to coming to the shed, of contemplating suicide, of alcohol issues through to experiencing extreme loneliness. Instead shedders reported having fun, laughing and enjoying themselves. Across the board they speak about have purpose and feeling better about themselves and their lives as a consequence of participating in the shed. They talk about social connection to each other and with their communities.

In contrast to these feelings it is also possible to argue that to attend a shed because it is a work-like space is hegemonic and that men need to break from the dominating effects of being socialized as workers. Rather they need to feel comfortable and able to socialize in other spheres of their lives beyond, and after working life. In essence, they need to find other places to go and find very different activities to do. And this is probably right. However at the very least, the work-like space of the shed offers an open-ended

transitioning space that is physically like work and has the familiarity of work, where men work side by side, yet psychologically and socially the shed is very different to work. Shedders don't experience the alienation that is argued to be a part of doing paid work. Shedders seem to have control over their work. Shedders hang onto the identities and personalities that men develop through their work, they build upon forms of masculine friendship and even intimacy through shared activity .

There are many critics of Marx. Yet at the same time recognition needs to be made of his seminal critiques and theorizations of work. For our own work we wish to explore the concept of alienation and for Marx, alienation was an objective state associated with all waged labour (Noon and Blyton, 2002). He argued that workers needed to exchange their labour for wages and in so doing were coerced into working under managerial control, making commodities for profit. This, he said, led to estrangement from the self, from the product, from the species being, and from others. Blauner (1964) builds on and refines this argument when he suggests that alienation is a subjective experience under capitalism and that it can lead to powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. In contrast to this and by using Marx's own critique, it is possible to conceive of work very differently and instead provide a much more positive and creative experience. Marx argued that work held a central place in human society and that members of the human species define themselves through their activities. Therefore, according to Marx, for work to be a positive creative force it would need to occur under non-capitalist conditions, as a free activity as part of voluntary labour, under the self-control of the person doing the work, where the work had an intrinsic meaning, contributing to the self identity of the maker, and where the product or outcome of the work was appropriated and owned by the maker/producer. By Marx's own reckoning on alienation and the labour process, when such conditions are met then this is thought to lead to the creation and re-creation of species being.

In this paper we don't mean to put shedders on the frontline against capitalism. However we do want to suggest that sheds are popular amongst working class men and reaping success with other men because they are work-like spaces with many of the familiarities of work but with very different creative conditions. Shedders contribute to the community by making things or providing services to others. They are active members of communities building connection and self worth. They are getting out, and being relatively active, they enjoy the company of other men. They feel useful, and some are even managing to do very meaningful work.

Many men, as do many women, go off to paid work. Some learn and develop abilities to make and create things, while others might provide services. (Ignoring for the moment that this accepted settlement over waged work can be interpreted as a hegemonic position within capitalism). Through this work they receive wages and from the wages they provide for their families and build their identities as workers and providers. Simultaneously, worker/providers develop confidence, self-satisfaction and self-worth around these capacities. Opposing this, Hoare (2006, pp.351) reminds us that, 'involuntary job loss leads to identity loss, helplessness, and a marked decline in self-worth for both genders'. Conceivably retirement stands somewhere in between. It is this defining of male identity as worker and provider that represents a dominant masculine hegemony.

Conclusion

Sheds, like many contemporary spaces where social and informal learning occurs are full of gendered contradictions and complexities. Based on this tentative academic analysis, in some ways these sheds are sites of masculine hegemonic relations and practices and in

other ways they represent a counter-hegemony. All that said, the men participating in the sheds are reporting increased happiness, satisfaction and social connection. We contend as we suspect Marx might, that sheds reproduce the social relations of work that are familiar and comfortable to men without the alienation and workplace injuries experienced through oppressive and unsafe workplaces.

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