

Transforming older men's learning

Introduction: Why worry about the transformation of older men?

While women have rightly been identified as having many fewer educational opportunities and outcomes in most world nations, in other nations problems are being reported in the education of some boys and men. Widespread population ageing and downturns in economic activity in some nations have led to many older men not in paid work. These older men are less generally likely than women to become involved in adult and community education. This article provides some good reasons for transforming older men's learning and wellbeing beyond work, based in part on research from Australia emanating from the 'men's sheds movement'.

In essence, when learning becomes more discretionary and less "hands-on" or vocational, older men tend not to participate. There is an overwhelming emphasis in education and training in most developed nations, including Australia, on getting people into work and up-skilling them once there. There is very little thought about what people, particularly men, want and need to learn to re-create and broaden their identities towards the end of and beyond their working lives.

So why do men tend to be missing as adult learners in learning beyond work?" This question is relatively easy to answer in relation to older men. Any educational (or health) system which operates from a deficit model, "treating" older men as students, clients, customers (or patients), including in remedial and compensatory literacy and vocational programs, without accounting for their personal, social and community interests and needs (including their diverse masculinities), is at best insensitive and inappropriate, and at worst degrading and patronizing.

While adult and community education *does* exist, it tends, for already marginalized groups, to be assistential, second chance, and compensatory. In Australia and many other nations, adult and community education has tended to be a women's sector, in which most men, particularly older men, do not always feel welcomed, included or at home. Men are likely to learn at work or independently, and women are more likely to learn at publicly funded institutions of community facilities (Schuller & Watson, 2009: *Learning through life*, NIACE).

Gender aside, all people have needs, including for learning, which relate very much to their life stages. While younger people tend to learn to develop their educational and social potential, adults in mid-age tend to learn to enhance their employment and to look after their families. By contrast, older people typically need to learn a whole new set of skills, to overcome the risk of social isolation and depression, to stay healthy and to remain independent. The older people get, the more they have to learn to adapt to change: to cope with new non-working identities, changes in mobility, health, financial and living arrangements as well as to changes in personal and family relationships. Much change in older life is existential and ontological. As Schuller and Watson (2009, p.109) put it, "[T]here can be few more important learning tasks than learning to make sense of the life you have lived."

A decade of research has identified that while older men have much that they need to learn in order to maintain their health and wellbeing and cope with radical changes as they age, they are much less likely to participate or be engaged if education, learning, health or wellbeing are fore-grounded and named as the activity or within the name of the program or the organization. For very good reasons, older men tend to avoid being put in situations and programs where they are at risk of being patronized or shamed for being illiterate or not knowing something.

Contrary to the negative, hegemonic stereotype of the “bullet proof”, uncaring, and anti-social, older man, our research shows that most men beyond the workplace have a range of life-enhancing learning needs that are typically not available in market driven, vocational programs pitched to young people who are preparing for their first job or who are already in work. At the same time, health and wellbeing statistics show that men not in work are often in poor health, and that older men in particular are prone to social isolation, poor health, depression and suicide. Most older men want to develop identities beyond work, learn to stay fit and healthy, overcome social isolation and remain connected to the community. For most older men with *and* without a partner, this need includes somewhere to regularly go and contribute to the community, aside from being at home.

Given these complex (and sometimes contradictory) life-wide learning needs and preferences that older men have, it is unsurprising that participation in “off the shelf”, vocationally oriented adult education and training programs are often perceived by older men to be unattractive, totally unsuited and inappropriate to them. Most older men have a lifetime of skills and experiences, but many have limited formal literacies and limited paid workforce aspirations, particularly where the learning is concentrated, formal, abstracted, distilled and named or foregrounded as ‘education’, or located in a setting where learning is the primary or only purpose or outcome.

All of this raises the question about whether any contexts can or could “tick” all of these boxes for older men. Our research has stumbled on one such context, that in Australia are collectively called “men’s sheds”, which have the capacity to holistically meet a wide range of needs for men beyond the paid work and to positively transform many men’s later lives. There are now over 1,000 community men’s sheds across the world, including 900 in Australia, with most of the balance in Ireland and New Zealand

Men’s sheds in community settings: Transforming older men

‘Hands-on’ participation in workshop-type settings is known to be attractive to men in many nations. Around fifteen years ago, in a very small number of locations and organisations across Australia, some men began to come out of their backyard sheds into community-based men’s sheds. With the support of a very diverse range of community organizations concerned about men’s health, wellbeing, productive ageing, social engagement and adult learning, the community “men’s shed” has since become a highly successful, grassroots community space for men. While most of the men who participate in community men’s sheds are older, retired or otherwise beyond paid work, some sheds actively involve and informally mentor unemployed younger men, school age children and men with a disability. The attraction is the opportunity to regularly socialize and “do stuff” together regularly in productive and *salutogenic* (health-giving) communities of men’s practice.

Most men’s sheds rely heavily on the passionate, voluntary contributions from the men themselves as well as from their local and regional communities. All men’s sheds tend to be different, catering for men’s diverse needs in very diverse contexts and springing from these very diverse auspice and support organizations. What is typical is that men enthusiastically and voluntarily participate in communities of men’s practice. The motto of the Australian Men’s Sheds Association is that, “*Men don’t talk face to face, they talk shoulder to shoulder*”. In most cases, men make and do things together, practicing hands-on skills and former trades. However in some sheds men simply sit and talk over a cuppa’ (tea or coffee). In effect men are also remaking themselves. Men report feeling included and “at home” in *their* shed, developing a

new social identity beyond paid work, and caring more for each other, for themselves, and by extension, for their partners and/or families. The products and services from men's sheds typically help support both the shed and the communities or organisations that support or auspice them.

Men's sheds are innovative in that they give license to men to develop identities as *men and mainly with men*: in grassroots community settings beyond work, to learn to stay fit and healthy, to overcome depression and social isolation and remain connected with and contributing to their communities. The learning, health and wellbeing benefits, while significant, work best for men if the activities and the outcomes are not named or fore-grounded, and if men are not patronized as students, customers, patients or clients from ageist or deficit models. While there is no compulsion, older men who participate (are typically passionate about their one day per week (on average) in the shed. There are rarely teachers or programs, through there are coordinators and facilitators in the background who are responsible and who make sure that the shed and the equipment are safe. In the case of men's groups with high needs, such as men with dementia or acquired brain injury, the activity is often modified and the staff is more likely to be trained or paid specialists. The men who benefit most are those who are much less likely to voluntarily participate in adult and community education or to join a health or fitness program, particularly alongside women.

While men's sheds in community settings are an Australian invention, the interest and growing popularity of men's sheds in other nations is indicative of a grassroots need for many older men in nations experiencing population ageing to have a "third place", aside from paid work and home or family, where they can regularly, voluntarily, productively, and enjoyably contribute to the community and learn informally with other men through an informal, grassroots, community organization.

Our research anticipates that there will likely be other hands-on or workshop-type places and spaces, *not* necessarily called "sheds" and not currently named as being specifically about or for men, that will prove to be amenable to a similar (but not identical) development in some nations within ASPBAE's footprint. Wherever these men's places or spaces are, the common theme is anticipated to be the critically important interactions between positive community participation and social inclusion, men's health and wellbeing, and learning for life beyond work.

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