
Social, Local, and Situated: Recent Findings About the Effectiveness of Older Men's Informal Learning in Community Contexts

Adult Education Quarterly
61(2) 103–120
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DOI: 10.1177/0741713610380437
<http://aeq.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

The informal learning that older (age 50+) men experience in Australia has been the subject of a suite of recent, intensive, mixed methods research projects in community-based voluntary organizations. The purpose of the research was to examine where men are learning in these contexts beyond work and formal education rather than to assume and problematize older men as nonlearners. This article draws together strands of completed field research to suggest that learning is effective for older men in community settings when it is social, local, practical, situated, and in groups, particularly for older, sometimes isolated men who have experienced a range of setbacks in life. While older Australian men tend to be missing from adult and community education (ACE) providers, they are able to informally share hands-on skills from their work lives with other men of all ages, with a range of important benefits to their own well-being, the well-being of other men, and the well-being of their communities. Some future areas for comparative international research are identified.

Keywords

informal learning, older men, community contexts, well-being

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Introduction

Older men are typically underrepresented in adult and community education (ACE) settings in Australia. The purpose of the research was to examine where older men (age 50+) are learning in contexts beyond paid work and formal education rather than to assume and problematize older men as nonlearners.

The term *older* has a number of definitions in the literature, from adults older than 45 years to people older than the nominal retirement age of 65 in Australia. Government policies that include “older” men, typically between age 45 and 65, have usually been framed around concerns about men’s perceived “early” withdrawal from the workforce and the difficulties in attracting men in that age range to formally retrain. There are also concerns about men’s deteriorating health and well-being status from age 50 onward (Department of Health and Ageing [DHA] 2008), with a perceived need to find ways to enhance men’s informal learning to assist with their productive ageing.

McGivney (1999b) provides a broad definition of informal learning, which has been adopted for the purposes of this research, as learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and arises from the activities and interests of individuals or groups. While informal learning occurs through all kinds of activities in the daily lives of every person in a wide range of social contexts through families, workplaces, communities, and leisure activities, this study focuses on the informal learning that takes place for older men through community-owned and -managed organizations in Australia. A suite of empirical research was undertaken into men’s learning in Australia between 2002 and 2009. The first studies examined men’s learning through ACE providers, football clubs, senior citizens, volunteer fire and emergency services, and land care organizations in rural towns in the Australian state of Victoria (Golding, Harvey, & Echter, 2004; Golding & Rogers 2002). A study of learning through volunteer fire and emergency service organizations in small and remote towns in five Australian states (C. Hayes, Golding, & Harvey, 2004) identified 85% of the volunteers as men, skewed toward older-age cohorts. A study of community-based men’s sheds in five Australian states (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007) found that more than 50% of the men who participated were older than 65 years. The most recent findings come from two 2009 studies of men’s learning through community-based organizations including ACE, extending to sporting, fire and emergency services, Indigenous and religious, age-related, and men’s special-interest organizations. The first 2009 study examined men’s learning through community-based organizations for the Western Australian Department of Education and Training (Golding, Brown, Foley, & Harvey, 2009), in which 76% of the men surveyed were older than 50 years. The second Australian study in 2009 involved older men’s (age 50+) learning and well-being through community-based organizations for the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (Golding, Foley, Brown, & Harvey, 2009).

Rationale for the Emphasis on Older Men

In the big picture, it is important to stress that it is women and girls who are the most excluded from education across the world. Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) note that

seven hundred and eighty-one million adults are illiterate and 64 per cent of these are women (UNESCO, 2006, p. 59). Nearly one billion people, one sixth of the world population have little or no education. . . . Two thirds of these people are women and girls. (p. 4)

While this article is deliberately focused on men's learning, and particularly on older men's informal learning through community participation, my interest and its implications extend to boys and families. The underlying research interest is on how attitudes toward lifelong learning appear to be shaped to cause what McGivney (2004) describes as the "significant and sometimes lasting impact on subsequent attitudes towards education and patterns of post-compulsory learning" (p. 55) for men. This research interest is supported by evidence in McGivney's (1999a, 2004) research in the United Kingdom, baldly but accurately encapsulated in her 2004 book title, *Men Earn, Women Learn*. The hypothesis behind this suite of research is that most Australian ACE systems, like Australian workplaces, are already highly gendered in ways that are likely to place more men on unbroken, lifetime-working trajectories and more women on broken, lifelong-learning trajectories. The recent interest is in what happens to older men beyond paid work, when for whatever reason the paid work "treadmill" and the associated, informal workplace learning stops. Our Australian community men's sheds research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007) examined learning associated with the rapid and recent grassroots spread of shed-based community organizations in Australia and their recent proliferation to New Zealand and Ireland. We concluded that these new social and informal workshop-type settings (which originated in Australia) provide a male-positive context in a community setting beyond the isolation of the backyard "shed" iconic to many Australian men. These primarily "men's sheds," informally and very effectively, satisfy a wide range of needs not currently available to older men in more formal health, education, and welfare formal settings, by catering to the specific, often acute needs of an otherwise difficult to reach group of older, typically retired, and sometimes isolated men. The research has led to an identification of some of the factors that have attracted older men, typically with limited formal or recent education and training backgrounds, out of their backyard sheds to learn informally with and mentor other men in community men's sheds (Golding, Brown, & Foley, 2007). It has also led to a consideration of some of the rationales for creating gendered learning spaces and programs specifically for older men in Australia (Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007).

The wider research literature (McGivney, 1999a) points to the debilitating effects on men over a lifetime of negative attitudes toward learning, in general, and formal learning, in particular. It is older men with the most limited and negative experiences of formal schooling who are facing the most difficult challenges in learning to cope with the changes associated with ageing and life and work circumstances, including changes to their health, ability and well-being, identity, masculinity, relationships, and employment status. The choice of this older age group as a research cohort is backed up by Australian demographic data that older men exhibit and report quite different experiences in learning and labor market participation as well as in health and well-being. As a consequence, men older than 45 years have been designated as an equity target group in Australia in many recent state and national government policy documents. These governments' particular interests and strategic policy interventions, including through recently commissioned men's sheds research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007; R. Hayes & Williamson, 2006), are less about concerns for their well-being in retirement and more about trying to get more men below the official retirement age (65 years) reskilled and retrained to reenter the workforce. The underlying neoliberal rationale is that since the existing formal training tends not to be effective once men have withdrawn from the labor force, as Lattimore (2007) also concluded, future formal training might be informed and complemented by known and successful, informal interventions.

These attempts at vocational retraining have been much less successful for older men than for women and younger men (Lattimore, 2007). The research into older men has also been motivated by evidence of relatively low levels of involvement by Australian men, particularly men older than 50 years, in ACE. While McGivney (1999a, 2004) has opened up significant new inquiries into why men in the United Kingdom tend to be missing from education and training initiatives, there have been very few studies of learning that situate men, and particularly older men, at the center of that enquiry. There have also been concerns about the health and well-being of men who on cessation of work (through unemployment, withdrawal from the workforce, or retirement) lose networks, friendships, and identities associated with paid work (Lattimore, 2007) or become socially isolated through disability, or separation from or death of a partner in retirement. Wilkinson and Marmot (2003) also identified concerns about the health and well-being of older men, including those not in work and with limited education, who are known to become more prone to social isolation in both rural and metropolitan communities, particularly after retirement.

Literature Review

Lattimore's (2007) major study of Australian men not in work concluded that while

training has been identified as a potentially important mechanism for re-integrating displaced older males into the labour market, . . . the worldwide literature on the

effectiveness of training has been relatively pessimistic about its ability to achieve this aspiration. (p. 187)

The perceived problem is seen to have two parts. The first is engaging older, long-term unemployed men and men who have left the paid workforce before age 65 in reeducation and retraining in the face of considerable disincentives and considerable reluctance, as documented by McGivney (2004). The second is achieving so-called durable vocational outcomes as an outcome of that learning. As a consequence, much of the research effort in Australia, such as in Lattimore's (2007) *Men Not at Work*, has been on "the role of early interventions for males vulnerable to future labour market withdrawal (p. 187), particularly through modification of school programs for boys. In contrast, the current suite of research is deliberately inclusive of the experiences—through survey and narrative—of men *already* withdrawn from the labor force and/or who do not access the training and adult education available. Like the study by Ruxton (2002) in the United Kingdom, this research anticipates the need for "cultural transformations of attitudes among men" (p. 43) toward learning across generations as well as changes to attitudes (in men and governments) that learning does not end at school. These changes and transformations are essential if the cycles of poverty in communities, which generations of economically inactive males can and do contribute to, are to be broken.

A large and growing proportion of men in many developed countries including Australia are economically inactive, a trend that has been aggravated by the increased long-term unemployment associated with the 2008-2009 world economic downturn. In 2008, the trends in ageing and improved health and aged care, combined with changes in men's retirement patterns and early withdrawal from economic activity in developed countries, were already increasing these numbers. Nearly one in three adult males in Australia in 2006 was neither in a job nor looking for one (Lattimore, 2007, p. xiii). Men with lower levels of education have tended to become increasingly vulnerable, but women have not (Lattimore, 2007, p. 194). While "the loss of economic activity associated with the non-participation of men is substantial, . . . an equally important dimension of impact is social" (Lattimore, 2007, p. 140). Lattimore (2007) showed that in Australia,

On average the stock of economically inactive men face a more severe range of socio-economic disadvantages compared with their employed counterparts: poverty, family breakdown, poorer physical and mental health, lower self assessed well being, and skill loss. (p. 140)

There is also evidence from Australia of a reduced tolerance in contemporary economies for the employment of men with disabilities and lower skills (Lattimore, 2007, p. xiii) as well as of the feminization of work and of some men being left behind by these changes. Kenway, Kraak, and Hickey-Moodie (2006) also acknowledged the

“trend for an increasing number of workplaces to emulate the work and working conditions that have historically pertained to the female retail and service sectors” (p. 64).

Golding (2008) concluded, from a review of the U.K. and Australian literature on men not in work, that the men most in need of social inclusion, particularly men not in paid work, are in several senses excluded from (or at least discouraged from participating in) ACE as it is currently configured in the United Kingdom and Australia. Being excluded not only from work but also from the supportive company of a wider pool of other adults is known to have potential adverse impact on their well-being: their health, self-esteem, and social relations. The literature also suggests that men not in work are also less likely to participate in or benefit from formal education, training, or learning for other purposes, including enjoyment and recreation, unless it is grounded in some form of practical, worklike activity. This finding emphasizes the likely importance and positive value to such men of informal learning through voluntary involvement in community contexts.

There is scope for future comparative international studies to investigate the similar and different roles globalization, culture, and masculinities play in making men redundant workwise in urban, regional, and rural contexts as well as in different nations and economies. Connell (1992) provided evidence that cultural representations of masculinity vary significantly between cultures. Kenway et al. (2006) concluded that Australian towns have “historically developed their self-concept around a particularly place-based version” of “hegemonic industrial working class masculinity that is central to the manner in which identities, work and all relationships are valued” (p. 66). Ruxton (2002) also identified the “lack of attention to the impact of different cultural contexts of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England on the framing of masculinities” (p. 117) as a “gap in the academic literature” (p. 117).

Method

Each completed research project (Golding, Brown, et al., 2009; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007; Golding, Foley, et al., 2009; Golding et al., 2004; C. Hayes et al., 2004) was based on mixed methods field studies that included men as participants in a range of practical activities in Australian community settings that included an informal learning component as defined by McGivney (1999b). The research has been grounded mainly in the learning-related experiences of male participants in a range of community settings across multiple sites in mainly regional, rural, and remote settings across several Australian states. The populated localities included in each of these studies, as well as the adult education providers, volunteer fire brigades, community shed-based organizations, and community organizations in the 2009 studies, were selected to broadly represent the diversity of organization types, Australian states, and degrees of accessibility/remoteness as measured by the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA 1999; recently upgraded to ARIA+). On-site surveys as well as recorded and fully transcribed, semistructured group interviews with participants were used to create narratives and quantitative data about men’s

self-perceived learning needs and experience. The details of the method, including the survey and interview research instruments and protocols used in the most recent community-based men's shed-based research, are found online in Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al.'s (2007) report and support documents.

A learning-oriented survey instrument that was applicable across a range of organizational types for a wide range of adult learners was initially developed for Golding and Rogers (2002) and adapted by C. Hayes et al. (2004) for researching learning through volunteer fire and emergency service organizations ($N = 321$). Questions relating to gender were included in Golding et al.'s (2004) survey ($N = 329$) of men's learning. These questions were further adapted for the community men's shed research survey ($N = 211$), as well as for the surveys researching learning by men through community organizations in Western Australia (Golding, Brown, et al., 2009; $N = 187$) and those researching learning by older men (50+) through community organizations (Golding, Foley, et al., 2009; $N = 219$). This suite of research and the survey instruments anticipated, accommodated for, and explored aspects of the hands-on, situated nature of much of the learning. The surveys elicited information from participants about all experiences through the organization that were learning related. The surveys were distributed in the organizations to random samples of participants in each location, weighted to account for the size of the organizations, by coordinators who were briefed to anticipate and help men with low formal literacy to complete them. The surveys also included questions to help create a social and demographic profile of the men who participated. This assisted in identifying statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) in the responses of the participant subgroups. The survey response rates for all field research studies of well above 50% were achieved by distributing surveys through known informants within the community organizations, customizing all surveys to include the name of each participating organization, sensitively offering assistance to complete the survey for men with low literacy, visiting all sites in advance of the data collection phase, and actively involving the participating organizations in the collection and reporting-back phases of the research. After quantitative data coding and entry, initial analyses of responses to all survey questions were undertaken using frequency tables, followed by an analysis of the variables of interest by subgroup to identify statistically significant group differences in the cross-tabulations. Because of the high average response rates from individuals, the risk of self-selection bias was relatively low, and the data from the achieved samples are considered a very good representation of the target samples.

Pilot surveys helped clarify and identify key issues of interest for further exploration in the focus group interviews. The semistructured, audio-recorded focus group interviews, typically with three to four participants for 30 to 45 minutes, explored why people participated and also sought to explore the outcomes from that participation as well as men's preferred pedagogies. Additional interviews involved some men and women holding responsible positions in the community organizations (such as manager, president, fire captain, coordinator) and focused on the rationale for the learning and the learning-related pedagogies and practices. The researchers undertook

all interviews with fully informed and consenting participants, as required by the university research ethics standards for approval. Wherever possible, the first site visit was for reconnaissance, for establishing context, and particularly for establishing trust and identifying research purposes and methods with potential informants and organizations, with interviews being undertaken during the subsequent visit. All interview data were transcribed, and the narrative data were searched for consistent and emergent themes, assisted in some projects by the use of qualitative software.

The combination of mixed methods described has been progressively developed through successive research projects since 1992 to cope with the difficulties inherent in undertaking quantitative field research in many small and relatively remote nonmetropolitan communities and organizations in Australia. The use of a small number of surveys conducted in each organization on a high proportion of total participants with high response rates in multiple small sites creates sufficient quantitative data for confident subgroup analysis. The on-site interview data provide rich narratives that support, illustrate, and explain the findings in the quantitative data.

Key Findings From Completed Research

The informal learning that men experience is shown from my Australian research, with others, to be most effective when it is social and situated and when communication and well-being are enhanced. Each of these aspects will be dealt with in the sections that follow.

The Importance of Situated, Social Learning

Our study of participants in community-based men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007), most of whom were not in the labor force and one half of whom were older than 65 years, highlighted the importance of the shed organization as a place for older men to meet new friends, to be with other men, to learn new skills, and even just to "get out of the house." Each of these factors scored more than 90% agreement among men's shed participants and more than 80% in the 2009 study of older men participating in community organizations (Golding, Foley, et al., 2009). Research with volunteer fire fighters (C. Hayes et al., 2004) also highlighted the importance and effectiveness of hands-on learning through practical and group activities that contribute to local communities, particularly for older men with negative recollections of formal learning at school.

Situated learning has been shown in all our Australian research since 2002 to be particularly attractive and therapeutic for older men who have experienced a range of setbacks in later life, those who are not in the labor force, and those who would not otherwise be involved in community activity. The research has confirmed that men of all ages are able, in nonthreatening social and situated contexts, to informally learn and share skills from their extensive life experience, including work lives with other men of all ages, with a range of important benefits to their own well-being, the

well-being of other men, and the well-being of their communities. It is not surprising that *teaching* older men with “off-the-shelf” programs designed for young people with limited knowledge of the workforce is typically poorly received and ineffective. These are men of considerable experience with much to share through mentoring as well as much to learn. The important and most valued future learning that men desire, identified empirically through surveys in all my community-based research, is “learning how to stay fit and healthy,” which is both surprising and counterintuitive from the perspective of theories about traditional and negative hegemonic masculinity.

Less surprising, the surveys in each of my research projects have also shown that men without wives or partners, men without other community connections, and men who did not enjoy or benefit from school are the most vulnerable but also the ones who benefit the most from informal community involvement in learning (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007). Unlike most research that focuses on adults who are enrolled in a course of formal study, this research has enabled us to hear what men have to say and experience through informal but active engagement with other men in “safe” spaces and voluntary organizations. For older men with the most damaged and changed lives, the most desirable informal learning places and pedagogies are in voluntary organizations, where they can safely contribute, “shoulder to shoulder” with other men. As one older man interviewed explained, the men’s shed allows him to

pass on skills, which not many people have left, traditional skills, I enjoy doing that, it gives me satisfaction. I find it helps me, particularly in the boring latter stages of my life to have at least a semi-formal environment to go to If I’m home I don’t stop work and I always bugger myself up and end up not being able to work for three months. . . . Not here, I am restricted to the times . . . and the other thing is being free to talk about mateship, that it does exist and it exists here and that’s important.

For most men, learning through a community shed is not about teaching, since much of the learning is through friendship and informal mentoring. For example,

I didn’t know too many people when I came along and whilst I like doing things with my hands, I don’t have much expertise . . . but I find the learning experience fantastic because there is always someone here who knows more than yourself. . . . You are picking up another person’s expertise and helping out and you pass on some of the stuff you have learnt.

Voluntary organizations were found in the U.K. research to include elements of formal learning as well as informal learning, learning from experience, and learning through positive social interaction (Percy, 1988). From the UK research, McGivney (1999b) found that “the siting of learning in a familiar local environment—is the major factor in widening participation” (p. 20) for adults. The “highest level of positive attitudes towards an active approach to learning [is] found among those who are actively

engaged, whatever the activity” (Field, 2005, p. 6). A wide range of key themes was identified in the interview data relating to what men gain from participating in the men’s sheds. They include a sense of “enjoyment,” “socializing” with “like-minded people,” a sense of community, feelings of being “relaxed,” and feelings of contribution and “giving back.” For some men, such as the three individuals who are referred to here, it was quite simple: “I quite enjoy sitting around with the rest of the blokes and having a bit of a yarn,” “I am a morose old bastard at home and this is where I come to socialize and loosen up. It takes my mind off other things,” or “I feel more relaxed when I go out with my people because they’re the same as me.” For others, including the three other individuals who are referred to below, the social attraction was more complex:

I am a Vietnam Veteran and I go through a few problems and this sort of helps . . . It makes me feel more relaxed and it gives me something to do. I like the people I work with. We have some men who come out once a week who have recently lost a partner. They generally last about three months—after that they get assimilated back into society as such and find their way again. . . . In most cases it has probably been a lifetime partner of about 50 years.

I remember coming here [to the shed] a couple of times and things were getting too much. I had heaps of support, people who knew where I was at and what was going on . . . and I wasn’t too embarrassed to bawl my bloody eyes out when things were too much.

For 36 years or so I have kept stuff that I have locked away because I was starting to break down. . . . I can come here and talk with people with like minds who have seen the same places and had the same problems. Things we can’t communicate even with our wives . . . with even our doctors and even our own psychologists. We can talk to each other about things and understand each other.

These findings about the importance of socialization in community settings to older men’s well-being are consistent with our Australian research findings (Golding et al., 2004) that volunteer fire and emergency services organizations, football clubs, and land care and senior citizens’ organizations were more effective and engaging informal-learning organizations for the men who participated in them than the programs offered by ACE providers. This finding is likely to bear some relationship to the fact that most ACE providers in Australia have been oriented to the needs of women and are not well suited to or inclusive of “working class” men. In both Australia and the United Kingdom, ACE has tended to be a women’s sector. In most developed Anglophone economies, ACE or its equivalent tends to be avoided by many working-class men. McGivney (1999b), researching in the United Kingdom, found that

people often choose familiar, non-threatening or stereotypical learning activities as a starting point and participation in these gives them confidence to progress

to something quite different. Providing “safe” first learning options [is] a useful strategy for widening participation and helping people to develop other learning interests. (p. 46)

For many male adult learners, ACE pedagogies tend to be unfamiliar, threatening, and atypical compared with places where they can acquire the confidence to learn formally. In contrast, men’s sheds are both familiar and empowering, as one man explained:

In a lot of areas of my life I feel powerless, but here at the shed I have got a chance to use my skills and do something . . . we are all really good at something and just to learn and to teach and to share is a great experience which really benefits my mental health.

The old adage “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” seems to apply much less to men of experience learning the same tricks off and with other men, particularly learning that is informal, hands-on, and social.

The Importance of Well-Being and Communication Benefits Associated With Learning

Our most recent research (Golding, Foley, et al., 2009) focused specifically on older men’s learning and well-being through participation in six types of community organization: (a) ACE providers, (b) men’s special-interest organizations, (c) volunteer fire and emergency services, (d) sports clubs, (e) age-related organizations, and (f) religious, Indigenous, and cultural organizations. In a survey sample of 219 older men participating in these diverse community organizations, learning by participating was viewed very favorably. For example, 94% agreed that they were keen to learn more, 95% were keen to improve their skills, and 91% felt that being part of the organization helped them learn. Nearly one half (48%) of older men agreed that the organization should offer more opportunities for learning. While their preference was for hands-on learning (72% agreement) within the organization (76% agreement), most of the men agreed that in general they preferred to learn in practical situations (95% agreement) and by doing (97% agreement). Apart from practical learning, there was much evidence of transformational, interpersonal learning. For example, a 59-year-old ACE participant said that learning “changes your whole life, you become a totally different person. These days I tend to listen to what someone else has to say rather than just blank wall.” A 62-year-old volunteer emergency service worker observed that the organization had taught him

to be a lot more tolerant of people’s abilities and their attitudes and their personalities. It has made me a more rounded person. . . . Working with volunteers is different from what most other people have experienced in their other lives.

The irony is that all organizations *except ACE* were found to provide very diverse and rich learning and community engagement for older men. Regular, social, practical hands-on activity, such as pottery, gardening, and carpentry, was particularly valued. Each of these so-called informal learning contexts provided older men with a high level of engagement, leading to extensive and rich opportunities for the development of all aspects of communication in the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). They were effective because they were not vocationally oriented; rather, they were directed toward the needs and interests of older men. There were ample opportunities in effective learning organizations for older men to learn and develop new skills with tools and technological skills, as well as to practice, mentor others, and share existing skills developed from their previous work and lives. Older men appreciated and benefited from opportunities to interact regularly in small groups, to perform tasks, to interact within the organizations, and through the products they make, to interact with and benefit the wider community, as well as the men themselves.

Similarly, a wide range of community organizations in the 2009 study of older men simultaneously and actively addressed several of the World Health Organisation determinants of disadvantage (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003), particularly social inclusion and community engagement for older men with limited formal education and for others who were otherwise socially isolated. Active involvement in practical hands-on activity in the form of voluntary and cooperative work was found to enhance men's productive ageing. It provided older men with the opportunities and incentives to remain fit and healthy enough to actively participate at any age; to reconnect with their past life and share hands-on skills with other men; to combat the likelihood, for some of them, of depression associated with withdrawal from the family and community; and to cope with changed abilities due to ageing.

Some Policy Implications of These Findings

This suite of research emphasizes the importance of learning through community settings for older men, with enhanced well-being as an important outcome. This importance is highlighted in nations such as Australia, where funding for ACE is being deliberately cut back by governments as part of neoliberal ACE reform. The trend in Australia is for national and state governments to value and fund learning only if it is vocational and for training and education to be progressively privatized and become part of the "market." For most men who are beyond paid work, their only accessible and affordable learning is, by default, through participation in community-based organizations rather than through vocational-training markets, including formal educational organizations. Developed industrial nations tend to assume that the creation of markets for education will match the needs of national economies and that governments need to do less rather than more for adult education. There is a recent, parallel and reverse assumption about the desirability of keeping all young people, including disengaged boys in developed nations, at school longer. However, the commonly held view that more education is always better for labor market performance is not borne

out by the data (Lattimore, 2007, p. 226). My research with others (Golding et al., 2004; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, et al., 2007; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2008; C. Hayes et al., 2004) confirms that the high proportion of men, particularly older men, with negative recollections of school and formal education, are unlikely to undertake formal training or ACE but nevertheless share and consistently express a strong desire to learn. More formal education or training for men of all ages with negative experiences of school, like more formal schooling for young people:

Might be seen as asking a sub-group of non-academically oriented students to do more of what has so far served them badly. This might not have the anticipated positive results for these groups. . . . It is particularly important to see jobs as learning environments for many people. (Lattimore, 2007, pp. 226-227)

One obvious “Catch 22” limitation of this finding of Lattimore (2007) about the importance of learning through a job is that men not in paid work of any age, including those men over 65 years of age and retired have no access to a paid workplace as a learning environment. Men in our research between 50 and 65 years of age report significant age-related discrimination when applying for jobs: Some have been hurt by successive rejection by employers, in some cases, even after completing labor market programs designed to enhance their employability. Another less obvious limitation of Lattimore’s finding, observed from our community men’s shed research and our 2009 men’s learning and well-being research, is that many men who left the workforce earlier than formal retirement age had actually been damaged by the physical and/or mental stress of work.

The suite of research, in its totality, shows that while men have specific and different learning needs, many organizations and programs tend to be gender blind and pretend that gender is unimportant. While women (McGivney, 1999a) heavily dominate community-based adult education courses, adult education providers often espouse policies based on equity. It is possible to argue that learning organizations that are ostensibly open to all but which attract mainly young people, women and people with higher levels of literacy, are open to question in terms of their commitment to equity (McGivney, 1999a, pp. 1, 4). Almost counterintuitively, in small and remote towns in Australia where there are few adult education choices, our 2006 studies (Golding, 2006) as well as our 2009 studies confirm that men prefer learning delivered locally, preferably through their own organization and generally not through the local ACE providers as they are currently configured (Golding, 2006, p. 199).

Rather than counting adult learning as a public cost that adults might pay more for, it is time to ask whether adult learning policies might begin to acknowledge that learning has the capacity to produce significant public well-being benefits that are economically positive. Most important, many of these benefits have been shown to be nonvocational and most effective in contexts where there are high levels of relative inequality. While there may or may not be an argument for allocation of more funds for higher levels of support for universities or vocational education and training, our

research provides convincing evidence of the value of assisting adults of all ages to negotiate transitions effectively. This includes not only those transitions associated with men's initial labor market entry and reentry but also, and particularly, their labor market withdrawal. The most valued learning older men experience have to do with transitions associated with relationship breakdown, divorce, separation, bereavement, the onset of dependency, and changing residential location.

Implications of the Research and Its Method

Golding and Foley (2008) recently acknowledged that it may be both necessary and desirable for new forms of adult education for some older men in the form of gendered intervention focused on access, to redress their perceived and known disadvantage and underachievement. While some males need access to adult education of a similar kind to that accessed by women, the research has confirmed that men who are most disadvantaged and most disengaged benefit most from a male-gendered community of practice that works to enhance their quality of engagement. However, the ways in which women are able to work effectively and alongside men in these community contexts where men comprise the majority of participants remains poorly understood and ripe for further theoretical investigation.

The research provides strong support for Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning and the notion of learning as participation, as a starting point for examining the types of learning opportunities experienced by older men (Fuller & Unwin, 2005). Adult learning, in general, and learning through community contexts, in particular, is most effective when it is "an ongoing, socially constructed, contextual process based on relational learning" (Comerford, 2005, p. 1). Benefits are recognized in learning that allows adults "to simultaneously engage one another around issue of culture, identity and difference and learn through engagement" (Comerford, 2005, p. 1).

Pringle (2000) concluded that existing research often displays a simplistic conceptual separation of the social problems that some men create from the social problems that some men experience. Pease (1997) identified the

importance of men having a space to explore some of the issues on their own. Sometimes the pain in men's lives resulting from over-work, emotional restrictiveness, ill health, sexual abuse, etc., requires single-sex groups. (p. 27)

The particular emphasis of this Australian research has been on examining men's experiences of learning separately and informally in groups, mainly with other men. Lattimore (2007) concluded that the factors underlying men's disengagement from the labor market need to be examined separately from those of women, "because the drivers and trends are often distinct, and the impacts also differ" (p. xiii).

Ruxton (2002) observed that "during the 1990s interest in research on men has grown worldwide across a range of disciplines . . . and a substantial body of literature has emerged" (p. 12). However, "much of the research . . . remains on a relatively

abstract and sometimes inaccessible level” (p. 13). While women remain the majority of the poorest groups, some groups of men and their different masculinities need to be understood if they are to be reached by services and programs. An Oxfam study by Ruxton (2002) identified that

While men as a group continue to hold structural power, and women remain the majority in the poorest groups, many men now face poverty and social exclusion too. Exploring the different ways in which particular groups of men and women are disadvantaged by economic and social change helps to deepen understanding of the increasingly complex reality of gender relations. It is therefore an essential prerequisite for developing appropriate analysis and action in response. (p. 2)

Golding (2006) also suggested that

men who perceive inequitable treatment as parents or who feel damaged after failed relationships need sites and services away from home supported and surrounded by other men where they can feel valued, recover and relearn. (p. 199)

The research method has enabled an examination of the role of masculinities in community-based organizations where such men are prevalent. These understandings, for isolated and working-class men, in particular, have the potential to aid in the understanding of men, with potential benefit to all parties (themselves, other men, partners, children, families, communities, nations) that are subject to some men’s frustration, hostile attitudes, and violence.

Conclusions

The informal learning that older men experience is shown from the research in Australia to be most effective when it is social, local, and situated. The research highlights the importance and effectiveness of hands-on learning through practical and group activities that contribute to local communities, particularly for older men with negative recollections of formal learning at school and who are not in the paid workforce. Situated learning is shown to be particularly therapeutic for older men who have experienced a range of setbacks in later life and who would not otherwise be involved in community activity. The research confirms that men are able, in nonthreatening social and situated contexts within a wide range of community organizations, to informally and positively share skills from their work lives with other men of all ages with a range of important benefits to their own well-being, to the well-being of other men, and to the well-being of their communities.

The research also helps explain the lack of interest in, and negative attitudes toward, education and training, typically held by older men who are not in paid work. While learning has been a deliberate focus in the research reported here, it has the potential

to inform wider studies of masculinity and well-being, in general, and men's health, employment, fatherhood, and violence projects, in particular.

Finally, there is copious evidence from this suite of research of the critically important role in Australia of community organizations in helping older men learn about change. This particularly includes men learning to enhance their well-being, to reshape their lives after a wide range of setbacks, to do with family, identity, ageing, health, and social and community relationships. It appears timely, as Field (2009) observed, "to tackle the persistent gap between medical and other approaches to wellbeing. . . . [O]ther interventions can also play an important role in an integrated strategy for promoting wellbeing" (p. 36). While there is a widely acknowledged, general statistical correlation between level of formal education, work, income, and well-being, recent research in Australia has shown that the outcomes from lower-level vocational training are either minimal or negative for many adults. There is a general move by most nations toward more vocational training through ACE and TVET (Technical Vocational Education and Training) and away from funding and supporting ACE. This move may be appropriate for some younger and unemployed adults but is inappropriate for older adults, particularly for older men who are not in work and typically retired. From research, it is well known that learning helps protect older adults from cognitive decline and support continued autonomy (Field, 2009, p. 36). Consistent with observations by Field (2009, p. 36), there is evidence from this research in Australia of a need for adult learning organizations "to align themselves with other services and campaigning bodies that are concerned with well-being." Conversely, health-related organizations are sometimes unaware of the well-being benefits of active community involvement, including through learning.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

Funding was received for the research into men's learning on which part of this paper is based, from the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (Victoria), National Centre for Vocational Education Research, National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre and the Western Australia Department of Education and Training.

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Bio

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