

What learning experiences and outcomes are valued by older men in Australia?

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Older men (50+) are less likely than other adults in Australia to engage in formal learning or to engage in adult and community organisations. This has previously and wrongly been interpreted to mean that older men are not interested in learning. This paper examines what learning experiences and outcomes are valued by older men. The insights and data that inform the study come from two main sources. The first source is insights from previous (2007) research into learning through the community men's shed sector in Australia. Around one half of participants in these grassroots community organisations were aged over 65 years. While learning is not foregrounded in the name of these organisations, research shows that aside from the wellbeing and health benefits, older men experience and learn a great deal from the accumulated skills and wisdom of other men in these shed-based organisations. The learning is achieved and valued in sheds when it is hands-on, through work-like communities of practice. The second source is data from a major mixed method study of learning in community settings in Australia by older men for National Seniors Productive Aging Centre (NSCAP). It involved surveys and interviews in 2009 with older male participants in community organisations in six sites in three Australian states. The research was inclusive of six different types of community organisations that older men are typically affiliated with in Australia. Aside from age-related and men's special interest organisations such as men's sheds, it included adult and community education (ACE), sporting, religious and Indigenous as well as voluntary fire and emergency services organisations. This paper is based primarily on an analysis of qualitative interview data from the NSCAP study relating to the learning experienced by older men from six illustrative community organisations.

The paper uses the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) as a theoretical framework to locate the types of learning that older men self-report, experience and value. The paper concludes that while most community organisations have the capacity to involve and engage men, men's sheds form a particular 'ideal type' of organisation for older, disconnected and disadvantaged men. Older men were found in the NSCAP study to learn, develop and practice all six, inter-related aspects of communication contained within the core skills framework in all six types of community organisations examined. Older men were found to develop and particularly value personal communication (expressing identity) cooperative communication skills learned by interacting in groups. Community organisations provided opportunities, not experienced elsewhere, for older men

to develop a wide range of other communication skills by performing tasks and interacting with the wider community. Older men particularly valued contexts where they were equal, co-participants in a shared activity rather than as students, customers or clients. The findings have important policy implications for lifelong and lifewide learning for older men in other national contexts.

Introduction

Australia prides itself as being a 'clever country'. Adult literacy, adult education participation and provision data suggest otherwise, particularly for adults not in work and especially for older men. Adult literacy and life skills surveys for Australia (ABS, 2006) suggest that around one half of Australian adults (age 15 to 75 years) have such low functional literacy levels in prose and document literacy that it limits their full participation in contemporary Australian society. The same surveys show that each of these literacies decline significantly for age cohorts over 55, as well as for the 63 per cent of adults surveyed who had not participated in a formal education course in the previous year. Around two thirds of those adults surveyed who were not in the workforce, as well as eight out of ten adults who had not recently participated in education or training courses, had such low literacy skills that it would make it difficult for them to undertake a formal educational course to be retrained. The implications of these data for older men extend beyond work (Lattimore, 2007) to other aspects of essential, lifelong learning. For example, around eight out of ten older adults in the same national survey lacked the basic knowledge and skills required to understand and use information relating to health issues (ABS, 2006).

Australia has very limited (and often missing) state or national provision of adult and community education (ACE) beyond that which involves vocational or industry competencies (Golding, 2008). Where ACE does exist, for the past three decades it has primarily been oriented to the needs of women (Golding, Davies & Volkoff, 2001). While all governments in Australia are progressively moving away from funding programs that are not vocational in content or intent, there is a recognition that 'not all adult learners are familiar with the instructional or socio-cultural context ... of formal learning' (ACSF, 2008, p.7). There is, as in many other developed nations (ESREA, 2009), a growing recognition of the need to find new ways to accommodate for the diverse lifelong learning needs of an ageing Australian population (Intergenerational Report, 2002).

For Australian adults, particularly men who were retired or withdrawn from the workforce, there are often no accessible providers or programs that meets their specific learning needs. Until recently those needs had been poorly researched or understood. McGivney (1999a, 2004) contributed significantly to address this research lacuna for men in the UK, and made important advances towards recognizing the value of learning in community settings (McGivney, 1999b). Conventional (or convenient) wisdom in Australian adult education had been that most older men, particularly those men beyond the workforce, were not interested in, could not be reached by and saw no value in learning. The current research effectively debunks these false presuppositions, by examining what learning experiences and outcomes *are* valued by older Australian men. Given

that older men who are not in the workforce tend to be missing from Australian adult education (in the places where it exists), the research looked for evidence of learning and core skills (literacy) acquisition in all its forms *through* older men's participation in community organisations well beyond those in which learning is conventionally recognized or researched.

Data sources and literature review

The insights that inform this research come from two main sources. The first source is insights from 2007 research into learning through the community men's shed sector in Australia (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007). They identified the effectiveness of this learning by older men in communities of shed-based practice as being consistent with a social constructivist view of learning. Social interaction in sheds was found to be a critical component of the situated learning that takes place (Vygotsky, 1977; Lave, 1988; Perkins, 1995). As ACSF (2008, p.16) also observed, much learning '... is socially constructed, occurring within, and strongly influenced by context and culture – personal, community, work and training.'

The second source is data from a major study of learning in community settings by older men for National Seniors Productive Aging Centre. (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey, NSPAC 2009). Like the shed-based research, it involved mixed methods research surveys and interviews with older (age 50+ years) male participants in 48 community-based organisations in six sites in three Australian states. In order to be inclusive of the majority of older men known not to be in work and not involved in education and training courses, there was a deliberate selection of the diverse range of community organisations found in each research site. The research was inclusive of six different types of community organizations that older men are typically affiliated with in Australia, including but extending beyond men's sheds and other men's special interest organisations. Apart from adult and community education (ACE), the organisations also included sporting, religious and Indigenous, voluntary fire and emergency services and age-related organisations. The results in the current, brief paper are limited to a small amount of survey data as well as to a brief summary of interview data from only six of the 48 organisations included in the Golding, Foley, Brown and Harvey (NSPAC 2009) research that are seen as illustrative of the wider set of organisations.

One major limitation of the research is that the insights about learning are restricted to the minority of older men who *are* involved as participants in community organisations. The magnitude of the 'missing', larger group of older men who were not involved can only be surmised from community volunteering data (ABS, 2007). Less than three out of ten of men over 55 years in Australia in 2006 were volunteers in community organisations, though an unknown, higher proportion were participants. However the proportion of adults involved in some form of learning (including informal learning) in the previous year is known to be much larger, at around 85 per cent (ABS, 2006, data from Table 11, p.35). While learning through participation in community organisations was not included in the ABS (2006) survey, 85 per cent of all Australian adults surveyed

experienced 'learning by trying things out or practice' in some way during the previous year. For comparison, adult literacy participation data (Perkins, 2009, p.47), suggest that less than 1.5 per cent of Australian adults are involved in language, literacy and numeracy programs and that women predominate in such programs.

The decision in this paper to try and avoid theorizing and naming learning as either formal or informal is deliberate, partly because there is no theoretical grounds for such a simple or confident categorization, but mainly because of the unhelpful power relations implicit in the informal versus formal learning discourse and division (Golding, Brown & Foley, 2009). All learning, including that which results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities, has aspects that might be regarded both as formal or informal, active or passive, or for intentions, purposes or outcomes other than for work or a vocational qualification. To name any learning as 'formal', or to use other loaded and related terms such as 'higher' or 'accredited' education can bestow such learning with unwarranted power, importance and hierarchy, in opposition to learning that is named as informal and presumed to be 'lower', non-accredited and of less value.

Jarvis (2001) distinguished between older men's need to 'learn to retire' and 'learning after retirement'. Jarvis identified the many values of learning for older adults, including for retirees 'removed from the constraints of work', who have to learn new identities in new and radically different circumstances as they change with age (p.74). Kidd (1973, p.125) had suggested that being and becoming were both what living is about and that they are also the chief objectives of human learning. Finsden (2005, p.63) predicted that 'men who retired from full-paid work [would] need to find volunteering work and/or learn more expressive roles as they enter older age or else enter what some have labeled a "roleless" state'.

The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF, 2009) was used in our NSPAC study as a convenient theoretical 'filter' for examining the learning that occurs through community-based organisations, often in the total absence of teaching or courses. Our reason using the ACSF is opposite to main reason for which it was created, as 'a mechanism for reporting outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy provision', (ACSF, 2008, p.2), specifically for the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. Nevertheless it was deliberately designed also 'as a framework with applications for a range of contexts' (p.2). The current paper takes a theoretical position that learning and literacy for adults is essentially socially constructed, and as much or more an outcome of adult participation in society rather as a process or 'set of tools facilitating an individual's participation' (Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004, p.39). In this sense, the research interest here is on what older men learn by their own agency through the process of participating, rather than what adults learn through being taught in courses, where they are typically treated (and sometimes inappropriately patronized, by women and men) as enrolled students, dependent clients or demanding customers.

Method

Focus group interviews took place with up to four fully informed and consenting older men (age 50+) in six selected organisations types in each of six diverse sites across three Australian states. The six selected community organisation categories identified in the introduction were inclusive of older men across the community and provided ethical access to men of all ages, both in and out of work, who had not necessarily had recent education and training experience. The interviews and surveys produced around 25 hours of rich, fully transcribed, audio-recorded interview data from a total of approximately 150 men, and survey data from a total of 209 men. This number of surveys was sufficient to undertake sub-group analysis including using tests of significance. The transcript data were analyzed for key themes and by organisation, allowing for a rich understanding and accounts of men's experiences with learning in different organisations and contexts.

The method for the NSPAC study, detailed in Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey (2009), required two site visits. The first comprised informal discussions with organisation representatives, was preceded by reconnaissance via phone calls, the internet, letters and emails. The second visit involved participant focus group interviews and surveys. The survey items and techniques were adapted from those used in previous men's sheds research (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007) to address the new research questions about men's learning and wellbeing. While the current paper does not directly address these wellbeing aspects, learning and wellbeing have been found from the wider research to be interlocking and interdependent. Each community organisation was found to facilitate learning supportive of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2003) social determinants of health, albeit in different ways, through being socially inclusive of older men; providing productive, social and enjoyable voluntary work; reducing stress through recreation, exercise, relaxation and enjoyment, as well as providing access to age and gender-appropriate information about health, ageing and regular eating (Golding, 2010).

The participant survey instrument focused on older men's experiences of participating in the organisation, attitudes towards and experiences of learning, as well as perceived wellbeing outcomes from participating. The recruitment of interviewees was organised by a trusted informant in each organisation. The interviews took place at the organisation or in another place familiar to the participants. Interviews were audio recorded, typically for approximately 30 minutes. All interviewees were fully informed and consented to the audio-recorded interview, consistent with university research ethics approvals. Interview and survey questions applied specifically to men as active participants in the community organisation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format focusing on learning and wellbeing associated with their participation.

Results

The results here are limited to some of the aggregated survey data, supported by findings specifically about learning from six selected organisations in four sites in three states. The selected organisations are seen to be illustrative of the

learning reported in the six organisation types in the wider study. In each case, the learning is analyzed using the typology of core skills or literacies from the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF, 2008).

The NSPAC survey data (N=219) confirm that the learning older men self-report through community-based organisations is diverse and valuable, and that for most men, more learning opportunities would be appreciated through that organisation. Virtually all older men (93%) agreed that they were keen to learn more. Most (72%) agreed that their communication or literacy skills had improved as a result of participating in the community organisation. A diverse range of learning opportunities was perceived to be available through all organisations for older men who participated. Hobby and leisure skills were available for 57 per cent of men surveyed, safety or health skills for 44 per cent, team or leadership skills for 43 per cent, and computer or internet skills for 37 per cent. For most types of learning, since two thirds of men were retired from paid work, the value of the learning experienced was seen to be most useful in the community or at home rather than in paid work. Virtually all men agreed that their preference for learning was by doing (97% agreement) and in practical situations (96% agreement). At least six out of ten disagreed that they generally enjoyed learning via the computer or internet (64% disagreement) or on their own or from books or other printed materials (62% disagreement). Overall 84 per cent of older men agreed that they regarded the community organisation as a place to learn new skills. In essence, older men certainly did want to learn, had a wide range of learning available to them and benefited from the learning through their community participation, aside from courses and programs.

The interview data from six illustrative organisations (*italicized*) are used below to tease out what learning is experienced and valued by type of organisation. *Hackham West Community Centre* in suburban Adelaide, South Australia is an adult and community education provider, that until recently had catered primarily for women. In recent years it had found creative and successful ways to welcome and involve older men as volunteers in the organisation. This participation included involvement in community events and participation in men-specific programs. Older men interviewed identified opportunities to develop and practice all aspects of communication in the Australian Core Skills Framework. Through regular voluntary participation, they had ongoing opportunities to restore and renew identities damaged by life events, perform tasks that were useful to the organisation, as well as to interact in groups within the organisation and with the wider community. The organisation was also socially inclusive of older men, and produced opportunities for meaningful employment as well as productive work and healthy and regular eating.

Sporting organisations like *Oatlands Bowling Club* in rural Tasmania provided opportunities for the development of several aspects of communication in the ACSF. Being essentially comprised of older men, it provided important opportunities for older men to express and share their identities both as lawn bowlers, as men and particularly as older men. While based around a sporting activity and skill, the opportunities for older men to compete in teams both 'at home' and 'away' provided opportunities for regular and therapeutic interaction

in groups, within the organisation, with other organisations and with the wider community. It also simultaneously addressed the issue of social inclusion for many older men who were otherwise socially isolated. For some men who were prone to depression, it provided a new activity in later life that was re-creational, regular, relaxing and enjoyable.

Religious organisations, like the *Ceduna Uniting Church* in a remote coastal region of South Australia, provided many opportunities for the development of several aspects of communication in the ACSF. Being essentially comprised of people of similar faith, the Church provided important opportunities for older people, including a minority of older men, to express and share their identities as Christians through worship and community activity with people in their own Church, and in the case of ecumenical organisations, with other churches and faith communities. While the activity was based around regular interaction in common faith groups, there were ample opportunities to perform a wide range of Church functions with other organisations and with the wider community. The Church simultaneously addressed several determinants of disadvantage through social outreach, inclusion and Indigenous community engagement for some older men who were otherwise socially isolated. It also provided continuity of religious practice and a range of activities in later life that were engaging spiritually as well as regular, relaxing and enjoyable.

Volunteer fire and emergency service organisations, like the *Lismore City State Emergency Services* in regional New South Wales, provided extensive and rich opportunities for the development of all aspects of communication in the ACSF for adults of all ages, including older men. Being a relatively small organisation, there were ample opportunities for older men involved to learn skills and take on specific and important leadership roles and identities over many years, as well as for formal emergency services learning and training. It was essential in emergency service settings that men also developed bonding social capital to trust each other in teams, which in practice, could be about life and death. There were rich opportunities through the regular, weekly training and drills, to perform tasks, use tools and technology and interact within the organisation, with a wide range of other organisations and with the wider community.

Age-related settings and organisations often have difficulty engaging older men in later life. Age-related organisations like the *Ceduna Over 50s Activity Centre*, also in remote South Australia, provided important opportunities for older men to practice a small number of aspects of communication in the ACSF. Men particularly enjoyed opportunities to share, reflect on and reminisce about their previous roles, lives and identities. The men's highlight was the trips to places that they knew and cared about. As 79-year-old 'Jock' put it so eloquently, older men, through retired, "are all part and parcel of the district". The Activity Centre monthly trip enabled men with diverse backgrounds to get together, share and recollect aspects of their identities associated with places across the district. It provided a particularly powerful way, along with the social nature of the lunches, to learn about other men by interacting in groups. For some older men, a community vegetable garden had become a focus of men's activity and identities. Again, men were able to express their identities through something they knew

something about and could do outside of the age-care centres in which many were otherwise restricted, even when their total mobility was reduced, in one case, to the use of only one arm. At this later stage of life many (but not all) men appeared to be less interested in interacting with new communities and using new skills, tools and technologies. They were more interested in sharing and making sense of their often rich and diverse, previous lives, particularly about skills, tools and technologies from their previous communities of work practice.

The *Alstonville Seventh Day Adventist Men's Shed* in regional new South Wales provided productive, practical, hands-on activity through woodwork for men well into their 90s. It provided extensive and rich opportunities for the development of all aspects of communication in the ACSF directed specifically towards the needs and interests of older men. There were ample opportunities for older men to learn and develop new skills with woodworking tools and technology as well as to practice, mentor others and share existing skills developed from men's previous work and lives. There were opportunities to interact regularly in small groups, to perform tasks, interact within the organisation and through the products they made, to interact with and benefit the wider community, as well as with other men.

Discussion

The diverse narrative and survey data from all community organisation types in the larger, NSPAC study confirm that despite a general lack of appropriate, age and gender-specific local adult education opportunities, a rich range of regular, social, practical and hands-on learning opportunities were available to, experienced and valued by older men. All aspects of communication identified in the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF, 2008, *italicized*) were present in both the survey data and the men's narratives. *Personal, cooperative, procedural, technical, systems* and *public communication* were all extensively reported and experienced. Older men reported a range of opportunities to *express identity, interact in groups, perform tasks, use tools and technologies, interact in organisations* and *interact with the wider community*.

The men's narratives illustrate the ways in which diverse community organisations have the capacity to involve and include older men. The most effective learning was associated with contexts such as community men's sheds, where learning as an activity was not named, but where learning occurred through their participation. This learning was particularly rich if, apart from the focus of the activity (on course-based learning or training, sport, fire and emergency services, gardening, art or shed-based practice), there was parallel consideration of the changing needs, wants, interests and aspirations of the *men themselves, as they productively aged*. All organization types examined provided a wide range of opportunities, albeit in different combinations and with differing emphases, for older men to learn, develop and practice all six, inter-related aspects of communication contained within the Australian Core Skills Framework.

In the case of *personal communication (expressing identity)*, there was evidence of significant opportunities for men to develop, express, model and share

positive identities as older men. The particular value of organizations such as sporting clubs, fire and emergency services organizations, gardening, craft and shed-based organizations was that they encouraged and provided opportunities for developing and enhancing positive identities for older men without naming or foregrounding the benefit. The most successful learning appears to be associated with contexts in which older men can be equal co-participants in a group activity rather than as students, customers, patients or clients. This success is enhanced in settings such as community men's sheds and gardens (but also in some sports) where the shared activity provides a context for men to learn about productive ageing, about being older, and about how to stay as fit, active and as healthy as they can be for as long as is feasible.

All organizations provided diverse opportunities for older men to engage in *cooperative communication (interacting in groups)*. These opportunities were richest in relatively small community organizations where a high proportion of volunteers worked in small teams or groups and took on responsible roles within the organization. In order to fulfill these roles, there was also a need for high levels of cooperative communication. Learning was particularly rich for older men in organizations, which also provided opportunities for *procedural communication (performing tasks)* and *technical communication (using tools and technologies)*. Both these aspects of communication presupposed a practical context in which tasks were regularly undertaken and tools and technologies were regularly used. While these opportunities were available in some sporting clubs, they were again richest in fire and emergency services, shed, garden and sporting settings where men were able to work productively for the common and community good in groups with other men.

Opportunities were also available in all community organisations included within this study (with the possible and ironic exception in some community education and training providers, where participants were treated primarily as students or as fee paying customers or clients) for older men to maintain and take on ongoing, responsible roles within organizations. There were therefore ample opportunities for older men to practice *systems communication (interacting within organizations)*. Again, these opportunities were richest in relatively small community organizations where a high proportion of volunteers had opportunities to take on responsible roles within the organization. In order to fulfill these roles there was also a need for high levels of *systems communication*.

Finally but importantly, most of these organizations actively interfaced with the wider community, providing rich and diverse opportunities for older men to practice *public communication (interacting with the wider community)*. It is important to note that some older men who did not use the internet or other contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as a mobile phones were sometimes 'passed over' when the responsible roles were allocated associated with both *systems communication* and *public communication*.

Conclusion

This research provides a strong argument for acknowledging that the role and perceived value of community organisations for older men includes much learning in communities of shared practice. The most effective learning organisations for older men amongst the community organisations studied were those that created opportunities for learning or improved literacy through participation, without necessarily foregrounding learning or providing courses. To return to Lonsdale and McCurry's (2004, p.39) literacy definition, the most important role of community organisations (including adult and community organisations) for older men should be to facilitate their participation in society, not necessarily to provide learning for learning's sake, or to exclusively provide the skills necessary for participation in paid work. It is apparent that many older men need to learn to cope with the difficult transition from paid work to retirement, and to cope with the many difficult and unforeseen changes that life throws up with ageing, including changes in relationships, identity and health status. The last thing most older men need at this stage of their rich, later lives is to be patronized in adult education, welfare or health services settings as students, clients, patients or customers. Nor do they need to have their often limited formal learning experiences discounted, devalued or remediated through formal and vocational education, retraining or literacy programs.

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