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## MEN'S SHEDS: AUSTRALIA'S GIFT TO THE WORLD

**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides a window into recent developments in the international Men's Shed movement up to 2022. It includes useful insights into the complex, fascinating and still evolving role that gender plays in Sheds, and is essential for understanding where the 25 year old Men's Shed movement and also the decade old Women's Shed movement, both originating in Australia, might be headed, and perhaps how it might take root in Poland or elsewhere in mainland Europe. The paper also explores what it is about Men's Sheds which is so attractive to older men and particularly how it informally enhances their learning and wellbeing. I have also included a brief reflection on some of the professional and personal factors which attracted me to research Sheds internationally, and to since become a Shed advocate and an Australian Men's Shed Patron.

**KEYWORDS:** men's sheds, women's sheds, informal learning, wellbeing, hands-on, communities of practice, shedagogy.

### Introduction

Community Men's Sheds, unlike home and backyard workshops, are local community organisations in which men gather in a workshop-type setting to share and practice hands on skills, and in the process keep themselves and their communities connected and well. I succinctly defined Men's Sheds and explored why they work. In essence, men are empowered in informal, homely, salutogenic (health promoting), gendered communities of practice (Golding, 2015a: 3-36). I suggested that Men's Sheds work "... because men are empowered as equal participants in a shared activity. They are not clients, customers, students, or patients. It mainly works for men who enjoy 'doing stuff' together beyond paid work" (Golding, 2021a: 13).

In most on the ten nations now with mature and robust national Men's Sheds movements and national peak body organisations, and also in the seven other nations with smaller numbers of Sheds, the majority of participants are older men (Golding, 2021a: 397). In the past decade a parallel and complementary Women's Shed movement has commenced, though the number of Women's Shed organisations globally (124) is significantly less than the number (2,736) of Men's Sheds (Golding, 2021a: 397).

Community Sheds and their respective national Men's and Women's Shed movements have been subject to a considerable quantum of research internationally from a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, as summarised in my texts – 2015b and 2021a. This research, inclusive of 131 illustrative case studies (Golding, 2021a: 8) paints

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a picture of a fascinating and diverse grassroots community sector, arguably underpinned by what I have previously described as a “revolutionary and transformational” model (Golding, 2015a: 13), which upends the power relationship between empowered older men and professional providers of gerontological services.

My paper draws largely on international insights documented in *Shoulder to shoulder: broadening the men's Shed movement* (Golding, 2021a) following on from my 2015 book, *The men's Shed movement: the company of men* (Golding, 2015a). *Shoulder to Shoulder* delved back into the Men's Shed movement's fascinating early history. In brief, the first community Shed for men in 1993 was in South Australia and simply called “The Shed”. The first *Men's Shed* by that name opened in Victoria in 1998, leading to an active Australian national movement by 2007, then spreading to robust national movements also to the UK, Ireland, and New Zealand by 2009. My 2021a book looked at what has changed to national movements during the past six years, inclusive of new Men's Shed movements in Denmark, the US and Canada as well as the quite recent (post-2012) development of the separate (and sometimes complementary) Women's Shed movement. My 2021a book also provided evidence of the adverse and often debilitating impact of COVID-19 on Sheds and “Shedders” (as they self-describe) internationally post-2020.

My current paper not only seeks to provide an introductory *big picture* to Sheds in community settings, but also to address some research questions drawing on the now existing extensive international research literature. In Golding (2021b), I provide a link to and analysis of all relevant research articles about Sheds in community settings published internationally in the past two decades to 2021. I described Men's Sheds in community settings at the recent (March 29-30, 2022) Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA) national conference in Albury, New South Wales as “Australia's gift to the world”, mainly for older people beyond paid work. While the Shed model and its application in hands-on, gendered communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) is not always perfect and not a panacea for all men or women, it is presented in this paper as innovation that powerfully subverts several dominant and often negative paradigms about ageing and older people, particularly about older men beyond paid work.

What is new about Men's Sheds in community contexts is that they demonstrate that older men have the potential to transform their own lives, health and wellbeing via a self-regenerating social movement, in which they informally share skills in workshop-type settings and generously give back to other men and the community. I contend that the model provides an opportunity to engage many people beyond paid work and integrate issues of learning, wellbeing and ageing as well as social and community inclusion without focusing on ageist notions of deficit.

The Shed movement and model deliberately move away from problematising and patronising older men as clients, customers, patients or students, instead empowering

them as side-by-side equal participants in a community in which the learning is informal, social, local and situated. In the process of doing, men talk *shoulder to shoulder* in ways that they might not talk face-to-face, thus the title of my 2021 book (Golding, 2021a). *Shoulder to shoulder* has been adopted as a theme by several national movements, abbreviated from what I originally said in the first Australian Men's Shed conference in Sydney in 2007, that "Men don't talk face to face, they talk shoulder to shoulder". In the process, men share critically important aspects of their health and wellbeing (Golding, 2021a: 4-5), in a way that helps break down older men's social isolation and loneliness in later life.

My paper is primarily for a European audience, on the assumption that previous findings about Men's Sheds, some theorised and published outside of adult education discourses, may not have extended far, particularly beyond nations and journals where English is the first language. To date, while there have been tentative Men's Shed-type start-ups in France, Belgium and the Netherlands via a European Regional Development Fund Step by Step (SBS) project based out of the University of Chichester in the UK (discussed in Golding, 2021: 213-215), Denmark was the only mainland European nation up to 2022 to comprehensively adopt and adapt a Men's Shed movement on the Australian model (Hedegaard, Golding & Nielsen, 2021). As a consequence, most of the other research up to 2022 has been generated in anglophone countries. I am indebted to Associate Professor Malgorzata Malec-Rawinski, already familiar with Men's Sheds in the field in Australia, for encouraging me to write this account and making this research more widely accessible.

## Research Questions

My paper seeks to answer three main research questions about Sheds in community settings in the order as below:

- How has the Shed movement spread, adapted and evolved?
- What role does gender play in Sheds?
- What is it about the learning in Men's Sheds which is so attractive to older men?

In addition, I use the opportunity as an older, white Australian male (age 73) to reflect critically on what profession and personal factors attracted me to research Sheds, and since to become an advocate.

## How has the Shed movement spread, adapted and evolved?

The very first Men's Shed by that name in a community setting opened in the small rural town of Tongala in the state of Victoria, Australia in 1998. It was motivated by the late

Dick McGowan, who was convinced that there must be new and better ways for older men facing challenges beyond paid work, to have “somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk with”. Less than 25 years later there were almost three thousand Shed-based community organisations globally (Golding, 2021a: 397). Given that older men and more recently older women tend to be the main Shed participants, the global COVID-19 pandemic and its higher risk for older health compromised people has impacted many grassroots Shed-based organisations very heavily. Since 2020, most Sheds have been forced to close at least temporarily. Some Sheds, particularly those based in rented premises including in Ireland and the UK, may never reopen.

The small number of earlier Shed-based organisations for older men which commenced five years earlier than the first Men’s Shed, in Goolwa and elsewhere in South Australia from 1993, did not have a gendered organisational name and were simply called “The Shed”. From 1998 most Sheds called themselves “Men’s Sheds” though a small number which deliberately included women on equal terms have become known as “Community Sheds”. A decade ago, “Women’s Sheds” specifically or mainly for women organised around the same general principles as Men’s Sheds began to appear in Australia and more recently in Ireland, the UK and New Zealand. By 2021 approximately 120 “Women’s Sheds” had been established worldwide, some of which operated under the same organisational umbrella or workshop-type space as an existing Men’s Shed.

With around 2,700 nationally registered Men’s Shed-based organisations across the world by 2021 (plus 120 Women’s Sheds), 20 peak body national and state/provincial Men’s Shed organisations (Golding, 2021a: 397), as well as new and expanding Men’s Shed movements in Denmark, the US and Canada, and the COVID-19 lockdown impacting heavily on workshop participation (Golding, 2021a), there were many changes to document in *Shoulder to shoulder*. The subtitle of my current article, “Australia’s gift to the world” is not an overclaim. The grassroots Australian model has been freely shared and gifted to many other countries by early Australia Shed pioneers and proved to be a robust and transferable movement internationally, at least until COVID-19 made working *shoulder to shoulder* inside unwise, uncomfortable or unsafe for many older people, thus debilitating some existing Sheds and permanently closing others.

The Shed model is deceptively simple but difficult to pigeonhole academically. What is clear from my 2015 book *The Men’s Shed movement* is that Men’s Sheds began as a ‘grassroots’ movement in rural Australia in the 1990s largely beyond the reach of the academy, with an emphasis on older men in retirement and beyond paid work and focussed particularly on men’s health and wellbeing. The broad model, accommodating of considerable local variation and adaptation, has since proved to be transformational to a wide range of men, women and local communities in many nations. In some ways,

the hybrid and enigmatic status of the Shed model is somewhat analogous to the hybrid and enigmatic nature of the Australian *Platypus*, one of only two of monotremes: curious, egg laying mammals, the only other monotreme, the *Echidna*, also being endemic to Australia. As a newspaper article, *The enigma of the Platypus* put it:

Found in the streams and lakes of eastern Australia, the platypus lays eggs like a bird, has webbed feet like a frog, a bill like a duck and venom like a snake. But, because so much of its life is spent underground, a lot about the platypus remains largely unknown (*The Age*, 2003).

To tease out my analogy with the Platypus, while Sheds in community settings have to do with ageing, informal learning, health, community connection and wellbeing in gendered communities of practice, none of these fields *on their own* define a Shed or what does or should happen to the men, women (or both) as participants inside. Importantly, Shed-based organisation names specify the location or neighbourhood but deliberately do not identify the hands-on activity. They are not named or labelled as wood, craft or metal workshops but all are possible. Nor are they called learning, social, retirement, health, retirement or wellbeing centres, but all are possible under the same roof and informally embedded or presupposed. So, what is it about a Men's Shed and the way it is organised that intersects so powerfully with the needs of the mainly older men who participate?

Men's Sheds have been shown by Deborah L. Mulligan (2020), as a follow up to her Australian doctoral study (Mulligan, 2018) inclusive of Men's Sheds to meet a number of older men's fundamental personal needs. In particular, Men's Sheds meet the need for *self-esteem* (feeling worthy, connected, wanted and valued), the need to be "self-determining" (being independent, autonomous, useful and of service) and also the need for "self-efficacy" (sharing wisdom and belonging).

Mulligan (2020) goes further to propose four organisational elements which act as preconditions to these personal needs being met: "a male only culture" (celebrating masculinity and providing a safe space for men); a grassroots focus emphasising equality; "anti-deficit positioning" (ignoring stereotypes and respecting ageing) and "community capacity building" (providing opportunities for its members to share their wisdom with the community). To these I have proposed a fifth precondition (Golding, 2021a: 405), that is providing a "salutogenic" (health promoting) setting, that creates a supportive environment to promote older men's health and wellbeing.

Because each Shed is autonomous and subtly different, most of what occurs with (and to) participants in terms of meeting their individual and different needs and also making them feel *at home* within the Shed organisation happens very informally. This helps explain why Sheds and their participant outcomes are not easy to analyse from just one academic field. Whilst claims can be made about the positive impact of Sheds on participant (and significant other) health and wellbeing though narrative and by

association, it remains difficult to definitively determine or scientifically prove diverse and different participant outcomes from a process and organisations that are so diverse, whose participants are self-selecting, and whose motivations are inherently social, local and situated in communities of practice, which may (or may not) be gendered. These important, fascinating, but theoretically *slippery* gender considerations are further teased out in the section which follows.

### **What role does gender play in Sheds?**

The first Men's Sheds created 25 years ago were both radical and conservative. On one hand they were radical, in that they deliberately created a new, male-gendered community of practice. On the other hand, they reinforced the conservatism seen to be associated with historical male-only hegemony. My contention, based on the evidence from the field, is that the role gendered spaces that are playing in Sheds are changing and evolving. Some of these field-based insights are based on research recently conducted with Dr Lucia Carragher (from Dundalk in Ireland) published in Chapter 10 of my 2021 book (Golding & Carragher, 2021), in which we propose a Shed typology by gender and organisational type, further developed in "The Women's Shed Movement: Scoping the field internationally" (Golding, Carragher & Foley, 2021), later published in the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* which the section of this article about a proposed gender and organisational typology for Sheds draws heavily from.

In brief, there are now active Men's Shed movements and peak body associations in nine nations (inclusive of the four devolved nation in the UK) with smaller numbers of Sheds in eight other nations, most recently joined by Iceland and Norway. Women's Sheds are operating separately (and sometimes together) in seven nations but mainly in Australia, Ireland and the devolved nations comprising the UK, where Men's Sheds achieved earliest traction. The highest density of Men's Sheds (per head of population) by 2021 was in Ireland. In general, Sheds are the most common and work best in smaller, rural, 'tree change' and 'sea change' communities where the proportion of older men (or women) beyond paid work is higher than average. In these situations, there is often a relative absence of government services for older people, particularly for men beyond paid work, in which case local people create their own grassroots, autonomous, community-based, salutogenic (health-giving) solutions to social and community isolation based out of a community of practice in a Men's Shed (or in some instances a Women's Shed), typically and mainly staffed by volunteers.

The notion that Men's Sheds are the end game, or that there are just two polar opposite Shed-based organisation types in community settings determined by the gender of the participants, and that there is just one organisational structural type is not borne out

by the observed range and participation patterns within either Men's Shed or Women's Shed organisations. While men-only or women-only Sheds are most common, in some cases an existing Men's Shed reorganises itself such that men and women run separate programmes on different days, sometimes with separate and parallel Men's Shed and Women's Shed organisations. In order to categorise the diversity observed in the field, our 2021 *AJAL* article (Golding, Carragher & Foley, 2021) proposes a typology by gender, summarised in Table 1, which acknowledges and is inclusive of the observed continuum in the data between standalone Men's Sheds organisation at one pole, exclusively and located separately for men (on the left of the table), and at the other pole (on the right of the table), standalone Women's Sheds organisations, exclusively and located separately for women.

Some nations including Denmark have focussed exclusively on men-only Sheds in their nationally coordinated network of 33 *Maends Modesteder* organisations (literally "men's meeting places" in English) up to 2021. This national network coordinated by the Danish *Maends Sundhed* (men's health) peak body regards men only community spaces as optimal for the anticipated health and wellbeing benefits. In a similar way and for the same reason, Scottish Men's Sheds have tended to be men only. By contrast, some communities in other nations including New Zealand have been less comfortable about creating men only spaces and therefore have a higher proportion of 'Community Sheds' or Men's Sheds inclusive of some women.

Most Men's Sheds across the 17 nations with Men's Sheds up to 2022 are mainly or solely for men, and most Women's Sheds (in the seven nations with Women's Sheds) are solely or mainly for women. However, Golding, Lucia Carragher & Annette Foley's (2021) typology, illustrated in the 131 Shed case studies in Golding (2021a) acknowledges that there is a wide range of other gendered combinations and possibilities now reflected in the diverse range of Shed-based organisations around the world. Given that Men's Sheds commenced first and also have a higher public and media profile, communities in nations that have sought to also create Women's Sheds (specifically in Australia, Ireland, England and New Zealand) have tended to embed their Women's Shed under an existing Men's Shed organisational *umbrella*, sensibly sharing equipment and resources and usually having men and women meet on separate days. Thus, most Women's Shed locations up to 2022 are in existing Men's Sheds, as illustrated in Table 1. Very few communities and organisations up to 2022 have had the resources to be able to create a standalone, purpose-built Women's Shed.

Some Shed types, illustrated in practice by the Shed in the tiny rural village of Yeoval in central western NSW, Australia (included as a case study in Golding, 2021a) sits towards the centre of this continuum in Table 1, with "Yeoval & District Men's Shed & Women's Shed" on the sign outside. Similarly, the "Frome Shed" in England (also



included as a case study in Golding (2021a) incorporates the Frome Men's and Women's Shed. Dereel Men's Shed in rural Victoria, Australia is an example of an organisation called a Men's Shed (in column 4 of the table) but where men and women participate together and on equal terms. It is important to acknowledge that an increasing number of new Sheds have decided not to gender the space, instead calling the organisation a "Community Shed" or simply the "Shed" but running a gendered programme on separate days or at different times. It is also important to note that our proposed typology does not yet factor in the reality of the diversity of other gender positions (LGBTQI+) between the male/female poles.

**Table 1.** A typology of Men's and Women's Sheds by Gender  
(after Golding, Carragher & Foley, 2021)

| Organisation Names  | Men's Shed | Men's Shed             | Men's Shed           | Men's Shed & Women's Shed | Women's Shed      | Women's Shed |
|---------------------|------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Participants</b> | Men only   | Mainly men, some women | Men & women together | Men & women separately    | Women only day(s) | Women only   |
| <b>Locations</b>    | Men's Shed | Men's Shed             | Men's or Shared Shed | Shared Shed               | Men's Shed        | Women's Shed |

Aside from this typology by gender, Golding, Carragher & Foley (2021) have also proposed a three-part organisational typology of Women's Sheds as summarised in Table 2, adapted from our experiences in the field and insights from the health and community engagement literature. The broad categories and associated organisational models we propose appear to fit with trends identified within the early Women's Shed data from Australia, the UK and Ireland.

**Table 2.** A Women's Shed Organisational Typology  
(after Golding, Carragher & Foley, 2021)

| Organisational Models        | Characteristics                                    | Typified in         | Relationship with Men's Sheds         |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Community Partnership</i> | Community partnering with charitable organisations | England             | Often close and collaborative         |
| <i>Peer Involvement</i>      | Local women supporting peers                       | Ireland & Australia | Minimal: Autonomous & independent     |
| <i>Cooperative</i>           | Connecting women to existing workshops & expertise | Australia & UK      | Sharing resources, expertise & skills |

We suggest that the "Community Partnership" organisational model is most evident in the UK (mainly England), with charitable organisations such as Age UK, Brighter Futures, and Footprints in the community working in partnership with local community



organisations to sponsor and open Women's Sheds, including overseeing the management of programmes within them. This model can be seen to be underpinned by a belief that Women's Sheds will be more effective when developed within a larger body that advocates for them nationally.

The "Peer Involvement" organisational model appears to be the dominant one in Ireland but also in Australia. Most Women's Sheds have originated from the efforts of a small number of highly motivated and politicised local women who have strived to raise awareness of local needs and grow support among their peers locally. Such Women's Sheds are typically autonomous and independent of Men's Sheds, although sharing many of the same principles, albeit from a feminist perspective. Activities are typically agreed upon and organised by women based on peer-based skills sharing (for example, via peer mentoring) as well as via peer support (learning together or sharing experiences) and empowerment (where needs are identified, and women are mobilised into action). In this second model, change is believed to be facilitated by the credibility, expertise or empathy of Shed members.

The "cooperative" organisational model, becoming increasingly popular across all countries with Women's Sheds, but less so in Ireland, has seen Women's Sheds share premises with Men's Sheds locally, but meeting on different days or at different times. This model connects women to existing resources and information, such as sharing workshop equipment and skills. Often men are allocated set time slots to teach the women how to safely use the woodwork-based workshop equipment such as lathes, band saws or other hands-on media, tools and materials.

It is relevant here in this necessarily brief and broad-brush account to note that Men's Shed organisations internationally tend to fall within four broad and sometimes overlapping models. One is the "hosted model", where an agency seconds staff and other resources, including premises, to bring members together, such as via the Age UK Men in Sheds program in the UK. Another, perhaps the commonest, is the "bottom-up" model where a group of men come together to plan the development of an independent, community-based Shed organisation themselves. A third model involves what is called an "auspice" arrangement in Australia (but called "sponsorship" in some other countries), where the Shed operates under the insurance, funding and organisational umbrella of a separate parent organisation. A fourth arrangement is where a service is provided by a service provider for men who are not in a position to fully self-organise, for example for men with dementia or some form of disability. Unlike with the previous three arrangements, there is more likely to be paid or professional staff and modified or specialised equipment to ensure the Shed is safe for participants.

## **What is it about the learning through Men's Sheds which is so attractive to older men?**

While Men's Sheds are theoretically available to men of any age, the reality is that most participants are older. In Australia, the median age is approximately 70: in Ireland, it is closer to 60. The nub of my explanation in (Golding, 2021a) is that Men's Sheds in community settings empower older men in particular to take charge of their later lives, giving back to other men and the community. In the process they move away from doing what aged care, welfare, adult education and health providers and their female-dominated workforces sometimes do to men, disempowering them by treating and serving them professionally within government *programmes*, often from deficit models, as clients, customers, students or patients. This all tends to occur, in Australia at least, in workplace settings where women are the relatively poorly paid, minimally trained, casualised staff' within the *service providers*. Unsurprisingly, older men are often reluctant participants in such programmatic, client-based interventions.

Older men in particular are attracted to Men's Sheds in ways which are totally consistent with the demographic age-shift in most world populations faced by two principal challenges neatly summarised by Tom Kirkwood:

The first is to ensure the greatest number of older people maintain their best possible mental capital, and so preserve their independence and wellbeing, both for their own benefit, and also to minimise the need for support. (Kirkwood et al., 2010: 7) [...] The second [...] is to ensure that the considerable resource which older people offer [...] is recognised and valued by society, and that they have the opportunity to realise the maximum benefit from that, both for themselves and by society. [...] In the absence of specific diseases that impair cognitive performance, the adverse effects of intrinsic ageing on the memory and capacity for intellectual work are greatly exaggerated in the popular mind. the result of persistent negative stereotyping of older people is responsible for a massive waste of mental capital in later life (Kirkwood et al., 2010: 8).

What Sheds provide for older men, and more recently older women, is a homely and gendered space to share skills and informally address both these major challenges beyond paid work. Firstly, by remaining socially connected and in the process maintaining physical and mental health and wellbeing as long as is feasible, and secondly, by passing on skills to future generations in a way that enhances other people and the community. The learning that takes place is not through teaching and courses. It is through participation, befriending, peer and group support, volunteering and intergenerational mentoring in ways that quite naturally also reaches, empowers and embraces those who are most isolated and vulnerable. Unlike most formal learning contexts, people share what they know and can do, and are in no way judged for what they can't do or don't know.

The learning that takes place in Sheds, with some exceptions, is mostly and deliberately informal. There is no enrolment, curriculum or assessment and there are no teachers. Learning takes place in informal communities of mainly hands-on practice in the Shed. Participants informally mentor, share and contribute what they know and can do, even if it is as simple as using a broom or making a cup of tea or reflecting on life in informal conversation. Importantly, participants are not patronised by age or ability and there is no compulsion. Nor is the activity defined in the name of the Shed, which typically just contains the name of the place and 'Men's [or Women's] Shed'. All men (and sometimes women) are welcome to participate at any age and invited to contribute from diverse backgrounds. Sharing and learning focuses on hands-on skills in a workshop-based community of practice, typically related to woodwork or metal. However, the research shows that older people learn much more, through life lifelong and life wide, in a place and space they feel welcomed and at home, in the case of the Men's Shed mainly or solely in the company of other men (Golding, Mark & Foley, 2013). As with learning, the wellbeing which results as a consequence of social and community inclusion is important but also informally addressed and seldom deliberately foregrounded.

Because of the unique, powerful, transformative and salutogenic (health promoting) ways in which informal learning takes place "shoulder to shoulder" in communities of practice in Men's Sheds, I playfully but also seriously proposed the idea of "shedagogy" (Golding, 2014) as an alternative pedagogy. My proposal is consistent with Paulo Freire's (1970) call in *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (see Schugurensky, 2011) to identify new forms of critical practice that interrogate, destabilise and disorganise dominant power/knowledge relations. I suggested that:

[...] shedagogy offers a form of learning that is intrinsically averse to external control. The 'grassroots' shed model positively challenges general preconceptions about many aspects of adult learning, in this case the specific difficulty of enabling men's agency and learning in community settings, including for and by older men, [...] to take responsibility for several of the key social determinants of health including their learning and wellbeing (Golding, 2014: 10).

### **What attracted me to research Men's Sheds and since become an advocate? A personal story**

As an ageing male and honorary academic, still deeply immersed in writing and researching (some might argue it is plagiarising) off the back of other people's stories and experiences, it is useful for me to reflect back on my research journey, including what it was that determined and shaped the course of my own life to lead to my current research focus on Men's Sheds. Before I was 30 years old my university education was in

geology and environmental sciences with five years in between as a touring musician. In the four decades since I've gravitated through working in secondary education, to researching access and equity in vocational and higher education, to focus in the past three decades on learning through life within and well beyond adult and community education in the spirit of Schuller and David Watson (2009). Men, and particularly older men, were seldom considered as "missing" in education research or on the equity policy radar.

I progressively became particularly interested in this research and policy lacunae and the transformational potential of adult learning in all its forms, particularly in less obvious, informal, "surrogate" adult learning organisations and settings which activate, sometimes by default, when and where formal educational provision cuts out. In Australian remote, rural and regional settings where formal education tends to be lacking, informal community learning becomes the norm. Collecting research evidence and writing stories about increasing access, equity and community connection to learning, and in the process enhancing wellbeing, particularly for older men in rural settings similar to those I grew up in, has since become my life passion.

My general interest in older men's learning and wellbeing was fed in part by McGivney's research with men and boys who are arguably missing from education in the UK (McGivney, 1999; McGivney, 2004). This led me to work with others from 2000 to create a whole suite of research specifically focused on older men's learning in diverse community settings inclusive not only of *conventional* adult and community education (ACE) settings, but also learning through fire and emergency services, aged care, sporting and religious organisations as well as through service clubs. All of this led inevitably to research why older men tended also to be missing from ACE, fortuitously at the very time when early Men's Sheds were beginning to spread. Our national study in 2007 of learning through Men's Sheds in community contexts (Golding et al., 2007) and of learning and wellbeing focused on older Australian men through community organisations (Golding et al., 2009) culminated in our book *Men learning through life* (Golding, Mark & Foley, 2013), and a suite of research about Men's Sheds in community settings in diverse international contexts (Golding, 2015b; Golding, 2021b).

In one sense it is obvious why older men hold a particular, personal interest to me. I am a relatively privileged, 72-year-old, white Australian, rural male only slightly older than the median Shedder age of 70 in Australia. My research trajectory outlined above has been shaped not only by other people's insights and stories, but as for most researchers, also my own upbringing, family background and personal stories, which I have never before shared or reflected on in text.

In retrospect, I can see that becoming a Men's Shed academic in later life is totally consistent with my lifelong, personal and deliberate attempt not to become what I do.

This is evidenced by my career trajectory of *keeping moving* through a number of apparently unrelated academic fields, in order, from geology to music, then wildlife research and environmental science, and finally *grazing* right across the wide and exciting research expanse of adult and community learning into later life learning. This trajectory from formal to informal learning, and from front-end education to learning through later life is also consistent with what I experienced as a teacher and lecturer. I became bored and alienated by the stultifying rigidity, hierarchical nature, unnecessary formality and predictability of education, curriculum, assessment and teaching in schools, vocational education and higher education, all of which are totally absent in Shed settings.

My alienation was increased when I came to understand the way that formal qualifications were being used unfairly to *sift and sort* on the pathway through education into employment. I found Stephen Gorard's (2010) explanation of how this tended to work in a regressive and counterintuitive sense to be particularly persuasive. Gorard suggests that taking a life course view, formal qualifications tend to be used not as a causative agent, but:

[...] as a substitute variable summing up the prior individual, social and economic determinants of 'success' at school and beyond. Educators do not select their potential students, nor employers their employees, on the basis of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity or age, as this is both unfair and illegal. However, they do select them on the basis of a substitute variable – prior education – that sums up, and is very heavily correlated, with such background factors. What is the sense in that? (Gorard, 2010: 359).

I became increasingly attracted to not only hearing men's stories, and writing and researching about them, but also acting as an advocate for learning that was not for earning, a theme picked up by McGivney's research (2004) in the UK, which in many other contexts aside from Men's Sheds, have the potential to subvert and potentially reverse the dominant paradigms about the uselessness of old men in retirement and the rarely explored but widely held belief that ageing is a one way trip to senility and death beyond paid work. My interest was also connected to my comfort in living in small, rural, *out of the way* community places and spaces where learning and learners are less formal, without teachers, curriculum or assessment. I discovered that the diverse and informal forms of sharing skills and learning by doing in communities of practice, such as in Men's Sheds, were enabled informally by harnessing the power and mutual support of the local community to maintain health and wellbeing and thus age positively.

My interest in Men's Sheds, on reflection, is also consistent with my personal story. Having seen my father's life, career, potential and personality limited and attenuated by war service in a small country town, I grew up with a desire not to become my father's son, and very deliberately chose not to become what I do. In later life, my father

in retirement escaped to the garage or ran errands for my mother who sought to get him out of the house. So too with my maternal grandfather, who spent most of his working life away from home in the navy spanning two world wars, to return home to a grandmother who banished him to the backyard shed and garden as dementia set in. In retrospect, my father and grandfather might have had very different lives if Men's Sheds had been around then.

I became aware as a consequence of a wide range of formal learning, research and life experiences that the most important and transformational learning occurred somewhat serendipitously, particularly for most people with a very limited formal education through immersion in life including in work, family and the community. My desire to make a difference to the world through elevating and celebrating learning through the community would ultimately become what's most important for my own happiness and fulfilment, particularly in my own retirement. I most enjoy dreaming up, creating, implementing and supporting grassroots community causes that did not previously exist, particularly those that challenge dominant community paradigms. I gravitated towards researching Men's Sheds because of their ability to create evidence and stories which gave older people license to share and transform their identities, with other men and the community. While I'm not an active community Shedder myself, I have used my privileged position as an academic and intellectual to use research as a mirror to inform and advocate for the Shed movement in community settings.

Penny J. Burke summarises my experience as a male learning through life fairly succinctly in generic, academic terms:

A range of interlinked, and contradictory masculine identifications are central to understanding the formation of aspirations, which are not fixed, but shifting through different kinds of life and learning experiences (Burke, 2006: 719).

I anticipated, when I serendipitously *grazed* into Men's Sheds as a researcher in 2000, to find some evidence of misogyny amongst older men, particularly those who had chosen a male gendered space to spend some (but not all) of their week. Instead, I found mostly *gentlemen* in the original meaning of the word, with almost universally positive support for participating in the Shed from women in their lives, typically a female partner or daughter. While there is some evidence of homophobia and racism amongst a few Sheddors, a trait common amongst all Australian men, in general terms, Men's Sheds, backed by the peak body Men's Shed organisations are positively inclusive of *all* men and their partners and families, supportive of diversity on the basis of enhancing their social inclusion, health and wellbeing and more recently very supportive of new places and spaces for women in Women's Sheds.

## Conclusion

In conclusion and returning to the original research questions, the Men's Shed movement, which originated only three decades ago in Australia, continues to rapidly spread, adapt and evolve globally. The community Shed movement has in the past decade broadened to include women, more gender diverse participants and organisational types. The hands-on learning in mainly gendered communities of practice that takes place in Shed-based organisations has proved to be particularly powerful and attractive to older men beyond paid work.

It is important in conclusion to reflect on what insights the highly successful, informal and hands-on pedagogies at work in Sheds might have for older adult learning organisations that older men tend to be missing and perhaps excluded from (McGivney, 1999). In most nations, adult education has tended to be a women's sector, not only in terms of the majority of participants but also in terms of staff. One explanation for this gendered nature of staffing is that a combination of low pay and tenuous part time work combined with inflexible cultural norms and stereotypes about women being more caring lead to adult education workforces, as well as those in aged and childcare, welfare, being almost totally dominated by women. This female gendering of staff, programmes and services towards women arguably impacts on and is often unwelcoming to older men, including in adult education.

It is also pertinent in conclusion to acknowledge that the global COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022 has severely strained workforces and participation in most community sectors, particularly for risk averse older adults in adult education generally and community Sheds in particular. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced a number of pre-existing factors, including that the mainly female professionals who provide adult education *services* in many anglophone countries are often poorly trained and woefully paid.

Men's Sheds depart from many of these stereotypes because they are almost totally dependent on volunteers, unlike professionalised and often highly female-gendered services in aged care, welfare, education and health care settings. In most Sheds almost all of the work and supervision is done by volunteers, typically by the Sheddors themselves. All of these findings provide important lessons which go well beyond Sheds, particularly towards changing the attitudes of governments, society and the community towards the professionalisation of services which address social isolation and loneliness in later life. The Shed model provides proof that older people including older men can actually be empowered to support each other, share skills intergenerationally, support the community, enhance the quality of their own lives, benefiting the



economy by reducing dependence on professional and government services. This is indeed Australia's gift to the world.

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