

Taking charge at any age: Learning and wellbeing by older men through community organisations in Australia

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Abstract

This paper examines and compares learning narratives associated with older men's participation in three community organisations in an Australian rural setting: an adult and community education provider, an emergency service organization and an aged care facility. The interview data are from a larger Australian study of learning in community settings by older men (age 50+ years of age). The paper examines what factors influence older men's learning and wellbeing through community organisations. It concludes that preferred learning for older men in community organisations is typically through group participation in practical situations for pragmatic purposes. Community organisations aside from education providers are shown to provide critically important opportunities for older men to actively redefine and recreate personal meanings and rapidly changing identities beyond those developed through paid work.

Introduction

Australia is experiencing an increasingly older population. One of the fastest growing cohorts is older men of working age who are not participating in the paid workforce or who are retired from paid work. These men are less likely than other adults to engage in formal learning, including through adult and community education (ACE) organisations. Such men are also vulnerable as they age to social isolation and problems with health and wellbeing.

Education and training discourses typically presuppose that adult education participants are either younger individuals preparing for paid work, or pursuing learning 'out of interest' through ACE providers. This research looks specifically and deliberately at older men's learning through community involvement in two organization types beyond ACE: fire and emergency services and an

age-related organisation in one rural site (Oatlands) in the Australian state of Tasmania. Oatlands was one of six diverse sites in Golding, Foley, Brown and Harvey's (2009) broader study of older men's learning through 48 organisations in three Australian states. The broader study sought to explore what is hypothesized as a broad gulf between work-related learning and the learning that is sought and valued by men through participation in community organisations during later life.

This paper explores Golding's (2011, p.248) contention, framed in a study of age-related community organisations in Australia, that the most effective learning for older men is in situations 'where men are actively involved, not only in the activity itself, but in the identification, framing and control of the activity in collaboration with other men.' The learning activities examined in the current study, as Field (2009, p.226) also observed in relation to our 2007 men's sheds study (Golding, Brown, Foley & Harvey 2007),

... would not normally be defined as learning, in that they are not part of any formal learning structures, but provide valued opportunities for the men involved to make transitions from their working lives ... to a range of activities [that] provide new learning opportunities as well.

Literature review

Burke (2006, p.719) noted that the discourse of lifelong learning in the United Kingdom is one that favours individualism and instrumentalism. All sectors of Australian post-compulsory education and training in 2011 can be similarly characterized as having discourses with a heavy emphasis on narrow and individual vocationalism and educational formality (Golding, Foley & Brown, 2009). Neoliberalism has transformed Australian adult education to an extent that many of the community learning functions of the remnant, state-supported adult and community education providers have been neglected or deliberately defunded by governments. And yet in Australia, as in the UK, 'Community-based informal learning plays a critical role in widening participation among people who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged' (McGivney 1999b, p.v).

In Ireland Ryan, Connell, Grummell and Finnegan (2009) have argued for 'a radical re-positioning of learners away from the individualist models promoted in mainstream education' (p.130) and urged adult education and theorists 'to pay more attention to analyzing the nature of transformative learning and

how it is achieved.' Slevin (2009) identifies the importance in East Donegal of enabling men 'to become more agentic in their own lives [as] a central aim of community education and community development' (p.57) from a Freirian (Friere, 1993) pedagogical perspective. Sfard similarly (2008) identified usefulness of the analogy of learning as participation compared to learning as acquisition and gaining knowledge. Sfard concluded that learning could be usefully conceived...

... as a process of becoming a member of a certain community, so that learning is viewed as a process of becoming part of a greater whole. Where acquisition stresses an inward movement of knowledge, participation is learning interaction, where the whole and the parts affect and inform each other and the existence of the whole is fully dependent on the parts. (p.33)

Aside from research in community-based men's sheds, summarized in Golding (2009), very few studies of Australian adult education have examined learning as a characteristic of older people's participation in community-based organisations. Mackean's (2010) study of older learners in Tasmania is one exception. Elsewhere,

Slevin (2009) investigated the transformative aspects of learning associated with minibus driver program for men in West Donegal. Mark, Montgomery and Graham (2010) investigated men's learning in community settings 'beyond the workplace' in several sites around Belfast. Oosterlinck (2010) undertook a case study of adult education in the Flanders region of Belgium. Oosterlinck (2010) observed that in Flanders, by law, 'Learning processes are not only set up in order to educate the individual, but to optimize the way our society operates' (p.15). However he concluded that the educational function of the set of socio-cultural organisations he examined in Flanders was in 'dire straits'. That research sought, as the current research attempts in Australia, to postulate that the socio-cultural education function of community organisations can and should go beyond the sum of individual competencies to include socially and personally transformative learning.

Method

The data comprise a small part of a very large body of interview and survey data from a national study of older men's learning and wellbeing through community organisations by Golding, Foley, Brown and Harvey (2009). The narrative data from the three community organisations discussed in this paper are drawn

from those collected in the small town of Oatlands (population 540) in rural Tasmania, Australia. Though located in the southernmost Australian State, the Oatlands Edwardian townscape, green hills and cool climate could superficially be somewhere in Ireland or the UK.

The interview and survey questions applied specifically to older men as active participants organisations. The 30-minute, group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The men's names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to ethically protect participant confidentiality. The qualitative data cited are limited to illustrative narratives from only two Oatlands organisations: a residential aged care centre, and a volunteer rural fire brigade, since the adult education on-line access centre had insufficient older males to participate in the research. The rich, narrative insights from only eight men interviewed in these two organisations are used to illustrate Beck's (1986, pp.115-120) general contention that in reflexive modernity, 'there is no more a general consensus about common norms and behaviour. Individuals live in different situations where they each construct their own identity, the 'do-it-yourself biography'.

The hypothesis in presenting these older men's narratives in such detail is that valuable learning for many older men in Oatlands is much more likely to occur through meeting and participating in different ways with other, older men than it does through undertaking formal courses as individuals in adult education.

Quantitative comparisons about learning in three organisation types

An analysis of the learning-related survey data from all six Australian sites (48 organisations) confirmed statistically significant differences by organisation type between older men's perceptions of learning, their learning needs and preferences.

Factors that attract and engage older men in three community settings

Of the six organisation types, *voluntary fire and emergency services* organisation participants were significantly more interested, active and engaged, 'hands-on' learners. Older men involved were significantly more interested, even than adult and community education participants, in more learning in a course that leads to a qualification ($p < 0.001$). Fire and emergency services volunteers were also significantly more likely to agree ($p < 0.014$) that they were interested in hands-on learning, ($p < 0.001$), to have attended a formal learning program in the past year, to have played a leadership role in the organisation ($p < 0.000$) and been active participants in the organisation ($p < 0.001$). They were also signifi-

cantly more likely to agree that they did not to feel comfortable about going to the local adult learning organisation.

By contrast, while older men in adult and community education (ACE) were more interested in classroom-based learning ($p < 0.004$), they were much less likely to be active participants in the organisation ($p < 0.001$) and significantly less likely to be interested in hands-on learning ($p < 0.014$).

Older men in age-related organisations differed yet again in their attitudes towards learning. They were significantly less likely than other men to be interested in a course to get a qualification ($p < 0.001$) or in hands-on learning ($p < 0.014$). Like fire volunteers, older men in age-related organisations were significantly less comfortable about going to what was described generically in the survey instrument as 'the local adult learning organisation' ($p < 0.008$), but significantly more likely to agree that their opportunities to learn were affected by their health ($p < 0.043$).

The types of learning that are experienced and valued

While 93 per cent of all older men surveyed across all six organisation types in Australia agreed that they were 'keen to learn more' through the organisation, it is important to put the learning they experienced in its wider context. Firstly, the learning had very little to do with paid work. Of all the older men surveyed, only eleven per cent expected to get more paid work as a result of participating. Secondly, only 46 per cent of all older men surveyed agreed that 'yes', they would be interested in taking part in more learning opportunities, if they were available through the organisation, though an additional 36 per cent surveyed answered 'maybe' rather than 'no'.

While older men generally reported that their skills had improved as a result of participating in the organisation (77% agreement for social skills, 72% agreement for communication or literacy skills and 61% for organisation skills), the strongest agreement had to do with identity, enjoyment, belonging, being accepted and giving back to the community. Virtually all men agreed that as a consequence of participating they felt better about themselves (98% agreement), were doing what they enjoyed (96% agreement), had a place where they belonged (91% agreement), could give back to the community (90% agreement) and also felt more accepted in the community. Consistent with these findings, while most older men regarded the community organisation as a place to learn new skills (84% agreement), even more saw it as a place to meet new friends (93% agreement), keep

them healthy and give back to the community (88% agreement for both). Most of these highly valued, social and community attributes are missing in traditional, individualistic discourses about mainstream education in Australia as well as in Ireland (Ryan, Connell, Grummell & Finnegan, 2009).

Qualitative comparisons about learning in three organizations

The narrative data from interviews in three organisations (*italicized*) in one rural Tasmanian site (Oatlands) are used below to illustrate and ‘tease out’ the trends observed in the national survey and interview data reported in Golding, Foley, Brown and Harvey (2009).

Adult and Community Education: Oatlands On Line Access Centre

The *Oatlands On Line Access Centre* was the only active, publicly supported adult education provider in 2009 in the small town of Oatlands, since the Community House and Community College were now respectively dormant and defunct. While Adult Community Education (ACE) organisations used to exist in many other towns like Oatlands in most Australian states, by 2009 neo-liberal training agendas had greatly reduced their coverage. In Tasmania, a series of government reviews and restructures had reduced ACE’s presence in Oatlands to what was effectively an information and communications technology (ICT) centre connected to the local secondary school. It was not providing ‘second chance education and training opportunities’ that the Tasmanian government originally intended such centres would do when set up a decade ago. While a small number of women were using the ICT services, very few men were involved either as participants or volunteers. Too few men, and none over 50 years old were using any of the On Line Access Centre services for the organisation to participate in the surveys or interviews. In effect, the adult learning opportunities available through the Centre were arguably totally inappropriate for or unused by almost all men in Oatlands.

Volunteer fire and emergency services organisation: Oatlands Fire Brigade

Oatlands Fire Brigade, like most fire and emergency service organisations in small Australian towns, was centrally located, seldom needed but always ready. While the number of people, mainly older men, involved as volunteers was small, the proportion of the small and rural Oatlands community involved was high, and there was some crossover between roles. In the case of road accidents, all three services often attended and closely collaborated. The jobs required more than technical skill, including some community service work, which was challenging for state emergency services (SES) volunteers, as a team leader stressed.

Some of the stuff on the side of the road is really gruesome. We have to cut bodies out and pickup the bits and pieces up and clear the bodies of cars. ... But that's part of the game, the community service and support. While 70 per cent of the volunteer ambulance work in Oatlands involves 'domestic' work, 30 per cent of it is sometimes horrific, road trauma.

As in many smaller towns with ageing populations, these emergency service volunteers, almost all men, were also ageing and had multiple work and community roles. The five men interviewed included men from all three services and ranged in age from: 'Les', 54 and Fire Brigade Captain; 'Noel', 55 and SES team Leader; 'Colin', 56 and fire service member; 'Ray' 64 and Volunteer Ambulance Officer, to Fire Service member, 'Jack' who was 67, a former police officer, the only retired interviewee and the most recent volunteer. Most of the men had long histories in this or similar voluntary fire or emergency services organisations.

Les explained the training, the fire brigade's role and the minimum training needed to get on the fire truck.

We have a two-hour practice ... every month ... we have a run, ensure that things are clean and tidy, reports up to date, the gear on the trucks is working properly. ... We handle all fires ... and we have a high incidence of vehicle accidents ... [The minimum level of training is the] Basic Fire Fighting Course. It's a two-day run through of everything after an introduction to the Brigade.

Les described the fire training and assessment options.

[If] someone comes along with interest [in training] we have a self-assessment [and] a program over a period of weeks or months that we basically put them through up to a level that we feel that they are ready. Then we opt to send them away to our fire service [headquarters] to do a full weekend, to do everything formally and when they come back they qualify. ... Then [they] go on as firemen and ride the truck and then from there on they pick the courses that they require going up ... to officer levels and hazardous chemicals.

In the case of the training for the ambulance service, Ray explained that ...

Our supervisors come down ... each month. ... They keep you up to scratch with your training and most of the time we assess ourselves on jobs and come back and say what we could have done right and what we did do right and talk about it and go from there.

Ray at 64 had been in the volunteer role for more than half his life and being on call every second week, sensed it was time for him to step aside but it was hard to find new members with the commitment and 'stomach' for the difficult work.

Colin reflected on what he had learned on his several decades of fire service.

Probably the most important thing is that you learn that everyone is human ... Different people have got different capabilities, different people have got different levels that you can put them to ... I mean I know [Noel's] skills, he knows mine ... and that flows into the day to day jobs. I know that I can go and say to [Noel], "Can you do this?" Whereas it might be a totally different role to what I would ask [Jack] to do.

I guess [you get] satisfaction knowing that you have done something great or good. ... [You learn] control, being able to have control at the scene of an accident ... knowing that you have done a good job, or done it to the best of your ability ...

Age related organisations: Oatlands Multipurpose Health Centre

The Oatlands Multipurpose Health Centre is set behind the Oatlands main street. The three men in permanent residential care who volunteered for interview lived in various parts of the complex, including 'Errol', age 79, who as a result of a stroke required a wheelchair and in his own words, only had 'one good arm', but which was still good enough to take part in the gardening activities. Several of these older Oatlands men had recently decided to set up a vegetable garden on part of the Health Centre lawn, and the Centre kitchen was using the produce.

'Frank' had been a farmer and was very polite and quietly spoken. There weren't many things 'Wally', hadn't done in his 67 years before being brought to the Centre in desperate need of care. More than in other interviews, this narrative has been pasted together with often short, one sentence fragments from the men's typically short but thoughtful comments and responses.

Errol explained that he “had that stroke and they wouldn’t look after me at home, so I had to go somewhere didn’t I?” Errol was understandably frustrated but satisfied by the ‘limited amount’ he could still do with one good arm from a wheelchair, including hoeing their vegetable garden.

[It’s] exercise of a different sort, like moving your arm mightn’t seem much but it’s doing good somewhere isn’t it? ... You feel satisfied when you achieve something, don’t you? ... We have had two or three feeds of new potatoes and green peas.

Errol still went up the main street on a ‘nice’ day.

Well I find if I feel all right, I go for a walk up the street. ... I go window-shopping ... There’s an antique shop up here, its very interesting to look at the junk or whatever. [On a wet day] I read ... there’s nothing much else you can do ... I watch TV. ... If there’s football on I like to watch that, and if it’s raining I listen to that.

Wally gave a potted history of his life.

Teaching in the army, working with books, sorting, working ... in Melbourne as a metal worker. ... I came out of [a rural town]. I was there for 15 years and I have been here [in the residential facility for] a year. [I came here because] I was spending more time at the hospital here [than at home]. ... I would like to be [home] but I can’t be ... As soon as I get back home I would probably be on the phone for an ambulance.

A few years after returning from war service Wally ...

... [was] on medication, and when I drank beer I would go off my head and start fighting and end up in the lockup and that sort of thing. ... I didn’t [associate it with war service] at the time, but probably do now. A lot of the blokes that I was with there either committed suicide or have ‘gone off their trolley’ at one time or the other. Most of the blokes that I know, if they are still married, they are not living with the same wife as they started off with.

Wally was now passionately involved in the garden. He described what was in season and reflected philosophically on the sudden onset of retirement and his recent life in care.

I don't get involved [in programs]. ... The most I do is a resident's meeting or barbecue ... Bingo doesn't grab me at all. ... [Retirement] comes all of a sudden ... it's inevitable, it's going to happen to everyone isn't it? ... I think if we accept what we have got and should be grateful. There would be something that you would want but we must accept what we get and that's it because it is good enough. I would like to go out the bush every day with a chain saw and get some wood but I have to accept that I can't go. ... Well that's what I have always done. That's the biggest problem, I think, is to change from one life to an entirely different one ... But we have to accept what we've got and I think everyone has and we are thankful for it.

Frank, now 83, had done a lot till it 'came to a sudden stop' when he divorced and moved to the Health Centre in Oatlands.

I started farming, when the boys grew up for higher education and moved to [the capital city]. I had several jobs down there. ... [Then I] just kept the farm going until I moved in here and then came to a sudden stop. ... When you retire, you retire. ... I took up reading .. The [paper], ... magazines. ... Physical exercises in the day room, ... twice a week, ... kicking balloons around from one to the other so you have got your presence of mind. ... [I most enjoy] sitting in the sun and reading. I don't [enjoy the social activities]. ... I don't join in at all.

Frank talked about how he came to be at the Centre and how he felt as a 'solitary person' about being there.

I grew up with elderly parents. I am not quite myself and wanted to make sure that my son didn't have the worry of the parents, I was living on my own I woke up after three days of rather a mess and at least coming in here my son doesn't have the worry of the parents [dying] on them. They were pushing for [me to come here]. ... They seemed to get sick of me and thought it was a good idea for me [to come here] anyway. ... When I was [in Hospital] there were five [of us] with strokes and each one ... lost our wives in the eight months period prior to when we had the strokes, and they reckon that's the cause of the strokes. If you could go back to what you used to do, well [Wally] would have had his occupation [too]. If he could go back and do that for say only two or three days it would feel different altogether, wouldn't it mate?
(Spoken to Wally)

Wally replied to Frank.

He would like to go back to that bloody farm. That's how I feel now, I used to get up every fortnight and take the dogs and the gun and go recreation shooting. Well there's nothing I would like better than that ... But it's something that you have to accept that you can't do, you have to accept [this ...] a cup of tea in the conference room, don't you? ... [I don't have privacy or freedom here]. Being a solitary person, it doesn't go down well. ... When you go back to what your normal life was out in the bush and do the things you used to do, you feel entirely different ... its natural isn't it?

The three men were asked what they got out of doing the garden. Wally found that it ...

Fills in the time. [It's] better than sitting in my room by myself. You get sick of reading or watching videos, well I do anyway. Plus you can go around and torment anyone else that is around. ... I like reading the big gardening books and that makes a difference. Yes I have still got a couple up there.

Discussion

It is only possible to compare older men's experiences of adult and community education in Oatlands with their experiences in other organisations by default. The only adult and community education provider in Oatlands had very few services or programs of interest or relevance to most older men. Using the key words from the title of McGivney's (1999a) study of men's learning in the UK, while men were not 'excluded' from the On Line Access Centre, older men were certainly and conspicuously 'missing'.

By contrast, the narratives from the voluntary fire and emergency service organisation confirm that the training, though accredited, was actively and regularly embraced. While the training was a necessary prerequisite of active participation in these organisations, most of what older men learnt and valued derived from the rich community of practice, working voluntarily in teams over decades in trusting relationships with other men. The training was regular, hands-on, accredited and oriented to future emergencies. However what older men were seeking and learning as participants was much deeper and broader, and acquired over many years through a rich community of shared practice.

Narratives from older men in the Oatlands aged care setting illustrated that men had been forced, often suddenly and through changed life circumstances (ageing, disability, loss of partner, need for nursing and aged care) to reluctantly move and live permanently in a very different place. Removed from familiar places, people, interests and resources, they were required to take on very different identities. What they enjoyed sharing with other men were reminiscences about old times and the 'hands-on' life skills. They were reluctant to be taught as students, socialized as clients or patronized as patients. Here, the older men were much less interested in learning new things. They were most interested in sharing what they already knew and could do to create new and very personal understandings about their diverse and often difficult and much changed, identities in later life.

The positive experiences older men related so personally and positively to each other in the context of extreme adversity and isolation in the Oatlands aged care organisation have strong parallels with the findings in Ghandour, Bahous and Bacha's (2011) study of ageing in a Lebanese nursing home. Regardless of difficult life circumstances, 'the words selected by all of the older men were positive and came from the discourse of living life to the full' (p.275). The Oatlands interviews were also 'linguistically and communicatively densely-packed' (p.273). Like the Lebanese study (p.278), what was striking was way the interviewees reconstructed their identities, including as learners, as they talked, contradicting the general negative stereotypes of older people 'based on ageist stereotypes of incompetence ... often directed at older adults in both institutional and community settings' (p.268). Both studies suggest that the context for learning in nursing homes will likely require both further research into gender differences and into the very different assumptions about learning in such settings.

What the survey and narrative data suggests, is that learning for men in later life is qualitatively different from and often totally unrelated to vocational learning. While adult and community education organisations position themselves as learning organisations, organisations involving communities of hands-on practice, such as voluntary fire and emergency services organisations, are in several respects more accessible to and accommodating of older men's preferred learning pedagogies than Australian adult education and training (ACE) providers. While both organisation types typically provide nationally accredited training, unlike ACE organisations, fire and emergency services organisations, require participants to meet regularly, maintain current competencies, take on positions of responsibility and work in teams. The data from older men

in age-related organisations are indicative of minimal or no interest in accredited learning, but a greater need for self-exploration through positively narrating the past. There is interest in collectively making and maintaining old relationships, doing hands-on things together and learning to stay as fit and healthy as possible as they age, even in the most adverse of circumstances.

Conclusion

The data and narratives examined, in their totality in these three different Australian community organisation contexts, lead to the conclusion that much learning for older men in later life is essentially ontological, about being, rather than cognitive, or about knowing. Through learning is undertaken under a range of other guises (vocational, community emergency service-oriented, therapeutic and leisure) consistent with different community organisation purposes, it is in many important and powerful senses re-creational, in that older men are struggling with new identities. Learning, even when it has a pragmatic purpose and is undertaken in a practical setting, allows men to actively redefine and re-create personal meanings and identities other than those they developed through paid work.

While the conclusions from three community organisations in one small, rural Australian town cannot be extrapolated internationally, data from the wider study (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey, 2009) confirm that there is an absence in Australia of appropriate opportunities to address positive ageing and social isolation of men, particularly for older men not in the workforce or unemployed. Mark, Montgomery and Graham (2010), in a study using a parallel method came to a very similar conclusion in Northern Ireland. With a very weak and deliberately emasculated government-funded adult learning sector and institutional aged care settings that tend to view older people as helpless and useless, Australian community organisations other than adult and community education, such as fire and emergency services and community men's sheds organisations, are playing critically important, new surrogate roles. This includes helping older men to participate in the community, shape new, positive and different post-work identities and improve wellbeing (Golding, 2011). There is evidence that is never too late for older men to positively take charge of life through learning, even when ACE is inappropriate or missing. These findings have important implications for adult and lifelong learning policies as well as for health and wellbeing strategies in other nations including Ireland and elsewhere in Europe with ageing populations, particularly where ageing is also exacerbated by high levels of unemployment.

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