

Learning from Men's Sheds:

Reflecting on the movement's Australian origins, global trajectories & radical implications for learning in the community



**Talk to Urban Rural Learning Initiatives LCN PASCAL Group
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Acknowledgements:

- I acknowledge the Dja Dja Wurrung people as the traditional custodians of my home. I pay respects to all Indigenous Elders, past, present and emerging.
- *It's 28 years since 'The Shed' in Goolwa, South Australia.*
- *It's 23 years since the first Men's Sheds (Tongala, Victoria & Lane Cove, NSW, 1998).*
- *It's 12 years since the first Women's Shed opened in Australia.*
- *It's 8 years since I floated the idea of 'shedagogy' & published 'Men learning through life' (NIACE, with Rob Mark & Annette Foley).*
- *COVID in the past 2 years has significantly challenged Men's Sheds & learning communities globally.*
- *Out thoughts are with the people of Ukraine.*
- *Thanks to all for making the effort to join this Zoom*
- *Thanks to Leone Wheeler, Rob Mark the LCN Pascale Group.*



My intentions

- Charting where & why the Men's Shed movement gained traction.
- Identifying 'Shed basics' and why the model works for older men (& women).
- Introducing the new (post-2010) Women's Shed movement.
- Teasing out some radical implications of research about Sheds and informal learning in community contexts.



Shedagogy

- *'... is a playful new way of thinking about learning for many older men. Shedagogy is a cheeky but useful rhetorical device to make a claim about the distinctive nature of men's shed-based learning. Its most important element of is that learning for many older men should be neither foregrounded nor named, but created collaboratively and 'hands-on' in communities of informal men's practice. Other essential elements are that participants bring and share what they know and can do, rather than being problematised and patronised from ageist and deficit models and learners, customers, patients, clients or students.'*
- Barry Golding, 'Men learning later in life: Floating the idea of shedagogy', Paper to 'Innovations in lifelong learning', ESREA Older Learner's Network Conference, Malta, 23 October 2014.



The 1986 South Australian ‘Men’s Services Conference’ organisers recognized that:

- *‘Many social phenomena classified as women’s issues cannot be successfully addressed without including men in the solutions.’*
- My contention: many of the issues that many older people face cannot be successfully addressed without including & empowering them in the solutions. Formal education is often totally inappropriate & disempowering.
- **Self-esteem, self-efficacy & self determination are the keys.**



Men's Sheds Globally

registered with national/state) peak bodies & (**Shed density / million population**); % *growth since my 2015 'Men's Shed Movement' book, and my 2021 'Shoulder to Shoulder' book.*

- Australia 1,306 **(51)** +43%
- Ireland: 391 **(83)** +72%
- UK: 806 **(10)** +535% (Scotland 120, Wales 75, NI 69, England 543)
- New Zealand 121 **(25)** +39%
- Canada: 40 **(1)** +900%
- Denmark 33 **(6)** +560%
- US: 19 **(0.1)**
- Kenya: 8 **(0.2)**
- Iceland: 4 **(11)**
- *Many more non-registered Sheds operate 'below the radar' in aged and residential care settings.*



Women's Sheds Globally to 2021

- Australia: 63
- Ireland: 28
- UK: 30 (England 23; Wales 4; NI 3; Scotland 2)
- New Zealand: 3

- **Women's Sheds globally: 122**
- **+2,000% increase globally since 2015.**



Sources of knowledge about Sheds, 1996

Maxine Kitto (Chaseling), Goolwa Heritage Club, SA, 'The Shed', 1996, in *'The Men's Shed Movement'* book, p.52.

- *'The vast majority of community & health workers were women.'*
- *'The women [inside the Club accessing our services] were healthier than the men [waiting outside in their cars].'*
- *'[My Dad's shed] is where he continues his role as the handman, the fixer, the craftsman, and it where he goes to get away from it all.'*



Sources of knowledge about **Men's Sheds**, 1999

Dick McGowan, Tongala, in 'The Men's Shed Movement' book, pp.124-5.

The Men's Shed is:

- *'Somewhere to go,*
- *Something to do,*
- *Someone to talk with,'*
- *'... to build the daily achievements of companionship, a feeling of worth, physical activity, a pride of accomplishment.'*



Older men must be given a choice to access:

from Deb Mulligan, *'Marginalisation of older men'* (2020, p.36), based on her Queensland PhD thesis, inclusive of Men's Sheds.

- *An all-male environment that is both non-confrontational & welcoming.*
- *A democratic, grassroots organization where a lifetime of knowledge and skills is appreciated.*
- *A community that values wisdom inherent in ageing, that does not pathologise or negatively stereotype older men.*
- *An opportunity to connect with a community where they can be of service.*



Necessary accompanying organizational ethos, structure & membership

Barry Golding, 'Shoulder to Shoulder', p.405, after Deb Mulligan, 2020, p.37

- *Male only culture*: celebrating masculinity & providing a space for men.
- *Grassroots focus*: emphasizing equality.
- *Anti-deficit positioning*: ignoring stereotypes & respecting ageing.
- *Community capacity building*: providing opportunities for its member to share the wisdom with the community.
- *Salutogenic setting*: providing a supportive environment to promote health & wellbeing.



My personal take

- *Sharing skills across generations & staying independent and well as long as possible are fundamental human rights & needs.*
- *Sheds spring up as grassroots community solutions, particularly in rural and remote areas,*
- *My late father & grandfather would have had far more enriching later lives if Men's Sheds were around then.*
- *My older men's cycling group, 'The Erratics', is similarly fundamentally important to my own mental and physical health & social wellbeing.*



Shed basics

- All Sheds are developed ‘on the shoulders’ of past giants, including all early pioneer Men’s Sheds.
- All men (and/or women, if the community decides) are welcome to participate.
- There is no ‘right’ way, aside from what the participants & the local community decides.
- It is the creative and participative *journey* for people & communities that is valuable, not the destination.
- Participants and not not customers, clients, patients or students.
- People generously share what they know & can do.
- Sheds reflect the diverse communities, men *and* women, that support them.



Big picture

- This year, 2022, it's 29 years since *'The Shed'* in Goolwa, SA (1993); 24 years since the first *'Dick McGowan Men's Shed'* in Tongala, Victoria (1998).
- 2,850+ Men's Sheds now open globally; 90% in Australia, UK or Ireland.
- Seven national Men's Shed movements and peak bodies globally.
- Fastest recent growth rates since 2015 in Canada, UK, Denmark, US, Ireland *and* Women's Sheds.
- Gender stance & roles in Sheds is decided locally.
- My books: *The Men's Shed Movement: The Company of Men*, (2015); *Shoulder to Shoulder: Broadening the Men's Shed Movement**, both published by Common Ground in US
- (* currently at 50% discount using 'BOOKPRIZE2021' voucher).



Australia's gift back to the world:

- The *Mechanics' Institute* movement (Scotland 1799; Hobart 1827).
- *Worker's Education Association* (WEA) movement (Scotland 1903; Australia 1913).
- *Kindergarten* (Germany 1837; Australia 1895).
- *Rotary* (US 1905; Melbourne 1921).
- *Lions* (US 1917; Lismore, NSW 1947).
- ***Neighbourhood Houses* (Victoria, early 1970s)**
- *U3A* (France 1973; Melbourne 1984).
- ***Men's Sheds* (Australia 1998; Ireland 2007 & UK & NZ 2009; Canada, Denmark & US 2015).**
- ***Women's Sheds* (Australia, 2010, UK & Ireland 2014).**

‘The Shed’, Goolwa, South Australia, 1993

established by Maxine Kitto,
recollecting the 1986 ‘Linking Men’s Services’ Conference in
nearby Noarlunga.





Early 1995-6 Shed developments

* with South Australian connections

- ABC TV Documentary *Men in their Sheds* (1995).
- John Williamson's *The Shed Song* released
- * Mark Thomson's *Blokes and Sheds & Stories from the Shed* books.
- * Leon Earle's gerontology research into backyard sheds.
- * *The Shed* opened in Hackham West, 1995.
- * **Presentation about *The Shed* in Goolwa at the 1996 Australian Association of Gerontology Conference.**

The Shed, Hackham West, South Australia (1995) established by Jack Ellis



Clem's Shed, Minlaton South Australia (2001)



The Shed XMRC, Salisbury, South Australia (2003) Ex Military Rehabilitation Complex



The Dick McGowan Men's Shed, Tongala (open July 1998) & Ruth McGowan, 2015

place for us

One man's personal philosophy that people with good ideas and those with resources can achieve anything has given a small Victorian town an unusual asset for its ageing men. *By Richard Snashall*

Dick McGowan is well known in the northern Victorian town of Tongala for putting his ideas on the table. And when it came to building a unique aged-care facility for men – in the form of a backyard shed – the former Tongala Primary School vice-principal's idea not only attracted the resources, but was appreciated to the extent that today it bears his name.

"All Australian boys need a shed," John Williamson sings in "The Shed". While that lyric may seem quaint and nostalgic to city people, McGowan knew that in the bush this was a serious sentiment.

When Jim Sargeant moved into the Tongala and District Bush Nursing Memorial Aged Care Complex in 1996, he was frustrated to find that his spanners and screwdrivers weren't seeing the light of day. This triggered McGowan, a member of the complex's committee, to consider the lack of resources for older men in care. "Men go from their roles of being the breadwinners



Simple yet sacred: the shed "out the back" of the Tongala Aged Care Complex.

and a central part of the community into aged-care, which is very female-oriented," he says. "That's not a criticism, it's just the way it is."

McGowan was also acutely aware of the high rates of male suicide in regional Australia, which he feels relate to the pressures of life on the land.

"Many people don't realise the

extraordinary losses farmers can suffer."

In most aged-care residences, things work – so there's very little offering for men who like to tinker. "Jim ended up giving his tool box to his son," McGowan recalls. "As much as he loved it, he had no need for it."

At the next committee meeting McGowan suggested the idea of a "shed" for older men – a place set up for blokes to build, fix, socialise, smoke, and proudly leave tools and unfinished projects on the bench. Also aware that older men's needs were not being served by traditional aged-care was director of nursing at the complex, Jean Courtney, who loved McGowan's proposal. "On the surface it's a shed," Courtney explains, "but it



Tongala Men's Shed, Victoria

Opened as the *Dick McGowan Men's Shed*, July 1998



Keith Bettany's 'Foldaway Shed', South Australia (2004), Alzheimers SA



Arklow & Killarney Men's Sheds, Ireland



Louth and North Belfast Men's Sheds, Ireland



Killorglan (Kerry) & 'Tree of Life' (Belfast) Men's Sheds, Ireland



The Squirrel's Nest (Men's Shed), Wales



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Westhill Men's Shed, Scotland





Research shows:

- Literacy (including health literacy) falls away with age (50% of Australian men aged 50 are functionally illiterate, at 70 it's 70% ... Then we stop surveying).
- IT (phone & internet) connectivity and skills are much lower in old, rural and lower SES men.
- Older men are much less likely to be able to access or sign up as 'students' to learning online.
- Service provision of health, family & age care services is highly female-gendered.
- Many such services do not meet older men's needs.
- Most older men feel disempowered as a consequence.

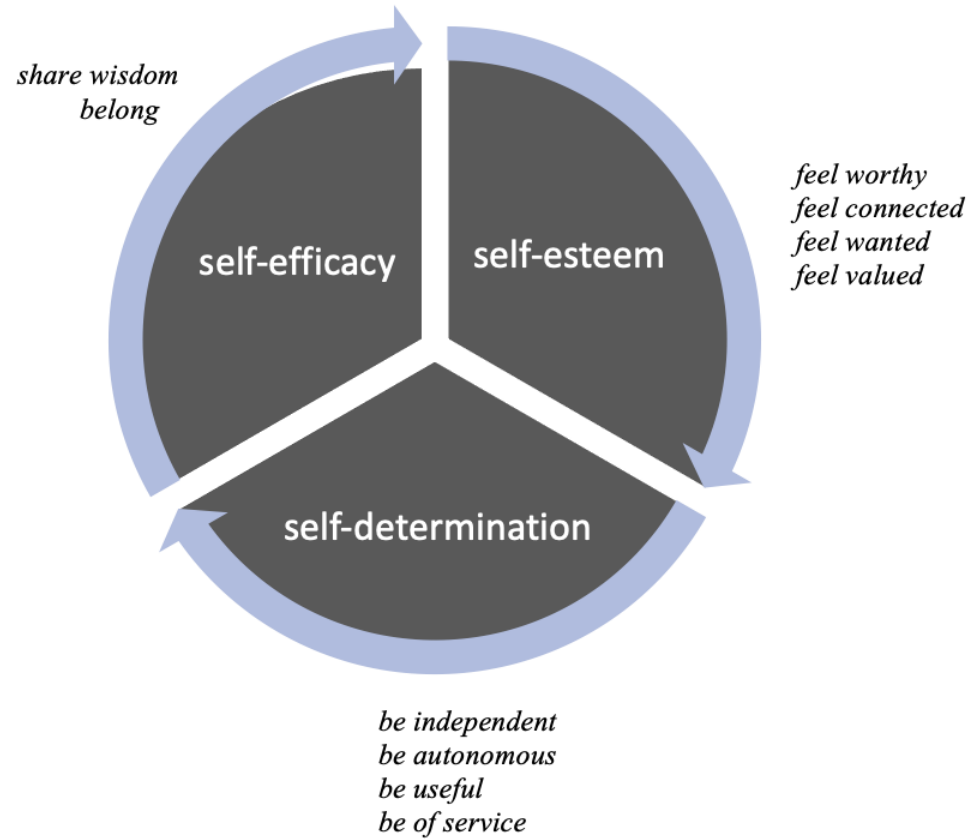


Growing from one to a movement

- Builds from successful grassroots.
- Empowers participants at a local level.
- Acknowledges the power and benefit of learning through communities of practice.
- Does not patronize, avoiding terms like client, customer, patient, student.
- The benefit is from active and positive connection & participation, not information or shame about literacies, health problems or deficit.
- Sheds don't prescribe the benefit or the activity.

Needs of all shedders

(Deb Mulligan, 2020: 'Clustered contributive needs of older men', p.37)





Needs of all [older] people

(after Mulligan 2020: 'Clustered contributive needs of older men', p.37)

- Self-efficacy (need to share wisdom & to belong).
- Self-esteem (feel worthy, connected, wanted & valued).
- Self-determination (be independent, autonomous, useful & or service).



Opportunities to:

- Build on the movement & make it sustainable.
- Empower & connect older men and women.
- Create communities of practice in aged care and residential settings.
- Set up specialist Sheds for older people with dementia, disability & PTSD.
- Encourage Women's Sheds (stand alone or on separate days).
- Keep older people connected & well.
- Ensure that the wisdom of older generations is shared and passed on to future generations.
- Totally transform adult and community education.



Questions?

■ Discussion