

# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING

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## FROM THE EDITORS' DESK

In this issue we are trying something different. As well as the regular sections, we are adding a *Personal reflections* section. Barrie Brennan will introduce this in the second half of this editorial.

The five refereed articles, as usual, embrace a range of subjects, from research circles to accidental activists! And in between, there are houses and sheds, mature-age student experiences and views about depression in the workplace. The two practice papers offer case study examples of learning – one in the New South Wales Department of Community Services and the other in Volunteering SA Incorporated.

The promotion of research activity in organisations other than the universities, and its potential links with organisational capability, is a subject of intense interest currently. **John McIntyre** focuses on the Circles of Professional Research Practice in Victoria, and takes us on a journey examining the rationale for their development, how they operated and the factors contributing to their successful implementation. His paper opens up ideas on the ‘negotiable spaces’ created at the intersection of policy, research and practice, and concludes with implications for capacity building in adult and community education organisations. Continuing the

theme of learning spaces, **Barry Golding, Helen Kimberley, Annette Foley and Mike Brown** then compare and contrast the development of neighbourhood houses and learning centres with that of community-based men's sheds. Their paper raises absorbing issues about the gendered nature of these communities of practice, and in particular extracts a number of what they call 'tantalising parallels' in the rationale for each type of learning setting. From learning spaces to learning experiences, the other three papers concentrate more on individuals.

In her paper, **Cathy Stone** brings us the stories of a group of 20 mature-age learners who have entered university via 'non-traditional' pathways. The transformative nature of their experiences as tertiary students, their sense of growth in confidence and achievement, and their hope and belief in a brighter future reinforces the importance of ongoing support for specific enabling programs at our tertiary institutions. The students present both the positive and negative aspects of their encounter with enabling education and their ability to speak for themselves is clearly encouraged by the author. **Lisa Davies** concentrates on eight human resource managers in the information and computing technology sector of South Australia, and their views on depression in the workplace. She found that there is a strong need for awareness training and increased access to information on this topic, as it is rarely understood and discussed to the point that there is a 'culture of silence' inherent in most workplaces. Yet its significance can no longer be ignored or go unrecognised, with more than 800,000 Australians affected every year by depression. **Tracey Ollis** explores the practices of activists as they learn from one another in a social context or 'on the job'. She situates her study within the long established but often today downplayed tradition of radical adult education, which encompasses community development activity, activism and advocacy of social change. In this paper, she selects three activists from her wider research to highlight the 'pedagogy of activism'. She finds that they

develop skills 'on the job', their learning is mostly informal, they employ both reason and reflection, and their learning is embodied and holistic, using intelligence, the physical body and the emotions to learn.

The two practice papers inform us of different frameworks within which to approach learning in the workplace. **Sean O'Toole** talks of a 'development centre methodology' used to measure the gap in performance for fieldwork staff in a social welfare organisation. It works within a capability framework, and uses work-based simulations and a 360-degree instrument. He argues that explicit technical knowledge is one aspect and that relational-type learning can be effective for behaviour modification and learning – but that it is generally learning by doing that has the most profound influence on long-term capability development. **Maira Deslandes and Louise Rogers** write of a volunteer training framework developed by a volunteering organisation that offers clear linkages and pathways for volunteers and organisations and provides the opportunity for building and promoting a 'culture of continuous service improvement'. They state that it can assist in the making of policy and financial decisions on the direction and type of training that volunteers require and desire, where that training might lead and what recognition can be given for it.

Now over to **Barrie Brennan** on *Personal reflections ...*

One of the most important and enduring concepts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that has carried over into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that of 'reflection'. It is a simple physical phenomenon that has been applied to human behaviour. One sees oneself in the mirror or in the still waters of a pond. There may be light or fire in the eyes. There may be grey hairs and the wrinkles of age or the frowns of frustration. We see and we respond. We have a point of view on what we see and what we may have wanted to see. Or this physical event may be carried out entirely in a cognitive way.

The reflective act has been adopted by many professions. Practitioners are encouraged to 'reflect' on their practice.

The acceptance of this concept may be linked to two developments in the past century in the world of knowledge creation and research. The first was the recognition that the development of knowledge was not only determined by research that was quantitatively based. Calculations with numbers did not necessarily produce conclusions that explained human behaviour adequately. The use of techniques such as reflection acknowledged the qualitative dimension of researching and understanding human behaviour.

The second development was the questioning of the assumption that knowledge was advanced primarily when the research remained objective. The individual and his/her feelings, values and experiences were not considered to be a relevant part of the research process. But as the individual and his/her feelings, values and experiences were noted as being central to the solution of human problems and the development of policies and programs, the subjective aspects of the research and development process gradually became accepted and integral parts of this process.

The acceptance of reflection was aided by these two developments and may have contributed to their adoption.

There were objections to the use of reflection. It was criticised as being wholly subjective and influenced by emotion and irrational thinking and behaviour. It was also claimed that reflection offered the possibility for individuals to justify and rationalise behaviour. This objection is deflected when the critical aspects of reflection are noted.

The reflection process may be very complex but also quite simple. There is the observational aspect, then the review/assessment of the action or activity, and finally the decision about what shall be done as a result, the potential for action.

Reflection has played an important part in the development of an understanding of learning, particularly adult learning.

In this journal with its focus on 'adult learning', there has been a wide range of papers on such themes as reporting research, proposing and criticising theories, assessing programs and recording history. The qualitative and quantitative have been evident. Some have stressed the objective approach, while others have been more personal.

Two papers were recently submitted to the Editor as refereed papers. They were sent to readers for review. The responses from the readers were that the papers were not appropriately considered within the refereed versus non-refereed dichotomy. They were different. They were different from other papers and yet had a common element between them. They were not critiques in the traditional pattern but a personal review on a career in one instance by the person who had lived that career and the offering of different perspectives on an issue by two people who had different roles and relationships in relation to that issue.

These two papers were tentatively given a different, new title, that of 'personal reflections'. The possibility of creating this new form of contribution for AJAL was considered, and the authors of the papers were contacted regarding their view of this new determination regarding their papers as a different form of inclusion in AJAL. The authors accepted the offer of having their papers published in this new section of the journal.

As a result, this form of paper for AJAL will be within its own section, *Personal reflections*, and be considered as separate and different from the categories of refereed and practice papers and research reports.

The two papers provide examples of what is intended in this new section. **Soapy Vallance** and **Barry Golding** present an ongoing exploration of the issue of learning of men, particularly rural men.

They contribute to this discussion from their varying perspectives, one as a learning centre co-ordinator and practitioner and the other as a university researcher. The second paper by **Janet MacLennan** relates the reflection of a university academic in her role as both teacher and learner. Her paper is structured in terms of a journey through her working life and the ongoing challenge for her as an adult learner to face daunting tasks as a learner.

We would welcome readers' and potential contributors' views on this innovation to the journal.

**Roger Harris**  
Editor

and

**Barie Brennan**  
Section Editor

## **Professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in ACE: lessons from the Victorian Research Circles**

John McIntyre  
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*The national reform agenda of the Council of Australian Governments challenges community education agencies to contribute to its goals and raises questions about their capacity to do so. It is crucial to define the conditions that are necessary to develop the capability of adult and community education (ACE) organisations to play a broader social and economic role. These include not only policy frameworks underwritten by strategic research, but the engagement of practitioners and organisations. The recent development in Victoria of Circles of Professional Research Practice, a form of participatory action research designed to promote such an engagement by ACE organisations, is analysed, drawing on material from an evaluation of the Circles intended to capture the experience, document its outcomes and recommend on its future applications. The article reviews the rationale of the*

*Research Circles, describes aspects of their operation and analyses the factors creating conditions favourable to professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building. In doing so, the Research Circles are theorised as a 'negotiable space' constructed at the intersection of policy, research and practice, drawing out implications for capacity-building in Australian community education and training organisations.*

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## Introduction

When the Senate Report of 1991 (Aulich 1991) recommended a national policy on adult and community education (ACE), it gave the highest priority to the coherent development of the newly defined 'sector' and recommended action on a range of fronts – securing recognition by government and access to funding, building the capacity of community providers and promoting the professional development of the workforce.

The role and capability of community agencies has again been highlighted in responses to the reform agenda of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), especially the discussion paper, *Community education and national reform* (DEST 2006), and the Review of the Ministerial Declaration on ACE. The DEST Paper examined the capacity of the broadly defined not-for-profit community education and training sector<sup>1</sup> to contribute to COAG's goals of increased workforce participation and productivity. Demonstrating the sector's aggregate contribution to vocational education and training, the Paper argued that a national approach was needed to foster the capability of community providers and recommended a 'capability framework' recognising the differences in scale and function across the different community agencies. The subsequent Review of the Ministerial Declaration on ACE will undoubtedly seek stronger commitments by the States and Territories

to the development of community-based adult education and training agencies.

If organisational capability is the key issue in the community education sector, how is this to be promoted? Given their relative autonomy, on what terms do community education agencies engage with State or national policy frameworks? What limits to capability are set by the part-time and voluntary workforce found in most community education organisations? By what means can professional knowledge and expertise be developed so as to underwrite organisational capability?

Recent developments in Victoria speak to such matters, in the form of an Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board initiative known as Circles of Professional Research Practice. This was a form of participatory action research designed to engage ACE organisations with government policy and its underpinning strategic research, thereby building their capacity for a broader social and economic contribution. Material is drawn from an evaluation of the Circles intended to capture the experience, document its outcomes and recommend on its future applications (McIntyre 2007).

This paper reviews the rationale for the development of the Research Circles, describes aspects of the operation and analyses factors contributing to their successful implementation. In doing so, the paper theorises the Research Circles as a 'negotiable space' created at the intersection of policy, research and practice, and suggests how they created conditions favourable to professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in community education and training organisations.

## The Victorian Research Circles

Public policy in Victoria has recently accorded ACE a significant role in meeting the 'adult learning challenge' and making Victoria an

'innovation economy'. The *Ministerial Statement: Future Directions for ACE in Victoria* outlined four strategies – broadening ACE's role through community partnerships, widening participation by specific groups, developing sustainable organisations and increasing government investment (Ministerial Statement 2005).

The Ministerial Statement led to a strategic program of commissioned research in three areas – a study of men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural communities (Golding 2005); an analysis of pedagogical and curriculum innovation in ACE surrounding the generic skills question (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004); and a longitudinal study analysing outcomes and pathways from ACE programs, particularly for educationally disadvantaged client groups (Walstab & Teese 2005, Walstab, Volkoff & Teese 2005, 2006).

Subsequently, the ACFE Board sought to capitalise on this research investment, so it might generate practical benefits and underwrite organisational capacity-building. Its *Research Strategy 2005–2007: Putting Research to Work* proposed 'Circles of Professional Research Practice' (hereafter Research Circles) bringing together researchers, managers and policy experts to inquire into their practice through a dialogic process. The Circles would 'contribute to extending the capability of ACE practitioners to use high-level research, to apply its findings, and, where appropriate, undertake research of their own that will assist ACE organisations to provide innovative and responsive learning environments for their communities'.

The Circles were to apply what was learned from the researchers, designing strategies to meet local needs, developing partnerships with other community agencies to achieve new goals and reflecting on the outcomes of the strategies. Three Circles of Professional Research Practice were established and ran from November 2005 to March 2006, with a second round of activity with different participants from March to November 2006. In each case, an ACE organisation was

selected to manage the project, recruit participants from sponsoring ACE organisations, arrange the involvement of the researchers, administer the funding and report to ACFE on their progress.

Each Circle drew members from across the ACFE regions and about equally from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas – over 100 practitioners, including managers, coordinators and teaching staff, representing over 75 organisations, or about one-fifth of Victoria's recognised ACE providers. The participants carried out action research projects, individually or in teams, facilitated by the Circle managers and the university researchers who had conducted the strategic research, with each Circle determining its own *modus operandi*.

Golding and his associates contributed to a Circle that worked on strategies for increasing men's participation in ACE organisations and improving opportunities for their learning. Sanguinetti and her associates worked in a second Circle that applied the ACE Pedagogy Framework, encouraging reflection on teaching and learning practices, examining how generic skills can be fostered and creating more conducive learning environments. Walstab and Volkoff worked in a third Circle, based on the ACE Longitudinal Study research that explored ways to promote participation by groups not currently using ACE.

### **Practice in ACE**

Before exploring further how the Research Circles supported practitioners to research their practice, it is necessary to appreciate the character of professional practice in ACE – it is both diverse and variable, encompassing the teaching and learning practices of individual teachers and tutors, the curriculum and the ACE ethos and culture (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004). Practice also includes the organisational work of setting strategy and marketing programs and services within the local community.

ACE practice is highly variable, owing to the differences in the size and capability of ACE providers, their staff profiles and job descriptions. Most staff are sessional and part-time, and work is less professionalised and career paths less defined than in education generally. Teacher and tutor identity is less defined by qualifications or credentialed expert knowledge, and educational practice may overlap with community development.

This variability sets a key challenge of developing of professional knowledge and expertise in the ACE workforce, one recognised in the goal of the Ministerial Statement ‘to enhance the sustainability of ACE organisations’ and achieve ‘stronger community-based adult education organisations through better business, management, governance, workforce and volunteer practices’ and ‘increased skills of ACE teachers, tutors and trainers’.

How then is ACE to build its organisational capacity through the development of its core educational and administrative staff and its part-time and sessional workforce? To build capability requires a high degree of collegial interaction within and between ACE organisations to overcome the isolation that is experienced by a largely part-time workforce. How can this development reach those with only a marginal association with an ACE organisation and limited professional identities?

### **Current thinking about practice**

The concept of Circles of Professional Research is consistent with a number of strands of contemporary thinking about the role of practice in the development of professional knowledge. Brown (2003) describes at least six conceptions of practice that are influencing thinking about the professional development of vocational education and training practitioners, and contributing to an emphasis on practitioners researching their work.

The genesis of the Circles can be traced to the ACE Pedagogy research (Sanguinetti *et al.* 2004) which worked with over twenty experienced ACE ‘co-researchers’ on the teaching and learning approaches that foster generic skills development within the ACE organisational culture and ethos. In what became intensive professional development in its own right, the collaboration and reflective analysis of the co-researchers became the basis for the development of the ACE Pedagogy Framework.

The Circles themselves employed various approaches to participatory action research as a means of developing professional practice, perhaps best known through the leading role of the ‘Deakin school’ (see, for example, Carr & Kemmis 1986, Kemmis & McTaggart 2003) which has popularised action research as a ‘spiral’ where ‘moments’ of planning, acting, observing and reflecting follow each other in a series of cycles. Beyond the critical action research model, adult education itself has a long tradition of activist and participatory research, including the North American, which emphasises community-based activist research as empowering participants (Selener 1992, Deshler & Grudens-Schuck 2000, McIntyre & Grudens-Schuck 2002).

Other strands of thought relevant to the Circles concept originate in the debate about the nature of expertise and its development in the workplace, stimulated by education and training reform. Recent work (Billett 2001, Beckett & Hager 2002) has examined the way that knowledge is brought into play by the objective situations of professional practice in an occupation, leading to the questioning of traditional ‘front-loaded’ models of professional preparation. Knowledge formation is now being understood as embedded in practice-based workplace learning, under conditions that are organic and holistic, contextual and experience based, and usually collaborative and collegial. Expertise, such as higher-order problem solving, is seen as forged in the heat of practical action (Becket & Hager 2002). Such conceptions of expertise are argued even more

expansively by Gibbons *et al.* (1994) in their concept of Mode 2 knowledge – knowledge produced in its context of application in contemporary workplaces, in a matrix of collaborative relationships between universities, public sector organisations and corporations. Such developments have raised the status of ‘working knowledge’ and spawned new models of workplace-based learning leading to professional preparation and academic qualification (Symes & McIntyre 2000).

Finally, a further influence on the Circles concept is the ‘communities of practice’ literature (e.g. Wenger 1998, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), which draws attention to the processes that lead a group of practitioners to define themselves as belonging to a community with a distinctive professional culture and shared expertise. The notion of *professional identity* is therefore implicit in the ‘community of practice’ concept, as knowledge and identity are subject to change via the subjective meanings through which professionals understand and ‘enact’ their practice.

Thus, the concept of Research Circles finds a powerful rationale in new understandings of expert knowledge as formed and validated through professional experience.

### **Participants’ perceptions of the outcomes of the Circles**

It is not possible here to provide an appreciation of the participants’ experience of the Research Circles, since this is given in some depth in the case studies of the evaluation report (McIntyre 2007: 21–44). Brief reference can be made to Circle outcomes as they were perceived by members, based on responses to a comprehensive checklist of outcome statements employed in the evaluation interviews conducted with over half the participants (see McIntyre 2007: 54–65).

Overall, there were outcomes and benefits in five areas:

- Awareness of the strategic research, and the need to interpret its significance for their local context, and understand the need to research the needs of the community and develop strategies to promote the participation of specific groups
- Applying research to practice, leading to improvements in teaching and learning practices, to induction systems and staff communication; finding ways to understand and capture good practice in ACE; generating strategies for promoting men’s participation in learning and enhancing the effectiveness of providers in meeting the needs of groups in their communities
- Strengthening the capacity of ACE organisations to meet the goals of the Ministerial Statement, by learning how to reach specific groups, opening up dialogue about directions, changing ways of delivering services, developing team approaches and forming partnerships with other agencies
- Promoting professional development through collaborative inquiry into practice, by creating opportunities to work with others, motivating action on needed changes, working with other organisations and learning about their approaches
- Fostering a participatory research culture in ACE, by developing the capacity to research practice in organisations, promoting reflection on practice as a professional activity and setting up action learning as part of work.

Participants attached the greatest significance to opportunities to network with others and learn about their problem-solving practices, to challenge colleagues to think more critically about practice and engage in collaborative and outward-looking professional activity. How the Circles promoted such outcomes is explored further in the following sections.

### **Constituting the Circles: key dynamics**

There were several conditions that were important in giving the Circles their character, engaging practitioners with ACE research and policy and favouring the formation of professional knowledge and the development of organisational capability.

First, the Circles were established in a considered way. Rather than direct it, ACFE implemented the initiative through experienced managers in ACE organisations, who played a key leadership role, freeing the researchers to act as expert resources and supporting the participants in the completion of their projects and motivating them to ‘stay the course’.

Second, activities were structured to ensure focused involvement, effective interaction among participants and the best use of consulting researcher time. There was a flexible approach to the adoption of action research methodology, giving scope for experimentation and creativity, and an emphasis on practical relevance rather than academic sophistication.

A third condition was the applicability of the original research on men’s learning, ACE pedagogy and the ACE longitudinal study. The research offered powerful rationales for practitioners seeking to change their teaching or their organisation. This was reinforced by the involvement of the researchers, who made available their expert knowledge of ACE policy, research and practice, and their wisdom.

Finally, there was the willingness of the Circle members to engage in the Circle process, to work collectively on researching their practice. Important to many participants was the support of their sponsoring ACE organisations, a core of whom were leaders in innovation, while others were wanting to move in new strategic directions. Funding support was key to motivating organisations and individuals to give priority to the project.

Such conditions created the Circle experience and the outcomes. Though there was some expectation that the Circles would continue in a self-sustaining way and engender a culture of action learning for professional development, in practice their viability was contingent on these conditions.

### **Conceptualising the Circle experience as a ‘negotiable space’**

As Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) remind us, practice is far from simple and comprises complexes of knowledge, understandings, skills, performances and behaviours. Practice has both performative and interpretive aspects, referring both to objective situations and to the subjective meanings that participants share in common with others. How the Circles impacted upon the professional practice of participants can be explored in an account that draws on interpretivist social theory with its roots in occupational sociology (Becker 1970), symbolic interactionism (Reynolds 2003), social phenomenology (Schutz 1974) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984). (For a recent discussion of interpretivism in adult education and training, see McIntyre & Grudens-Schuck 2004).

It is clear that the predominant impact of the Circles was upon the professional knowledge and understandings of the participants. The Circles involved a process of expressing and externalising ‘knowledges’ that were in the normal course of practice, somewhat taken-for-granted, or embedded in practice situations. Professional knowledge stagnates and becomes ‘sedimented’ unless challenged by situations of practice that are out of the ordinary, triggering critical reflection and an accommodation to new realities.

In understanding how it created a potential to challenge existing professional practice, it is helpful to visualise the Research Circle as a unique space at the intersection of the three ‘domains’ of the specialised ‘knowledges’ of research, policy and practice – a space

that belongs to no one domain, that is defined and negotiated by the participants through the Circle process.

In other words, the Circle is a 'negotiable space' that is 'outside' the normal professional experience of the researchers, policymakers and managers as well as the ACE practitioners (Figure 1). This idea is freely adapted from Brown and Jones, following Giroux, of a teacher's pedagogical knowledge as 'a theoretical space, for creating a discourse capable of raising new questions, offering oppositional questions and producing fresh objects for analysis' (Brown & Jones 2002:102).

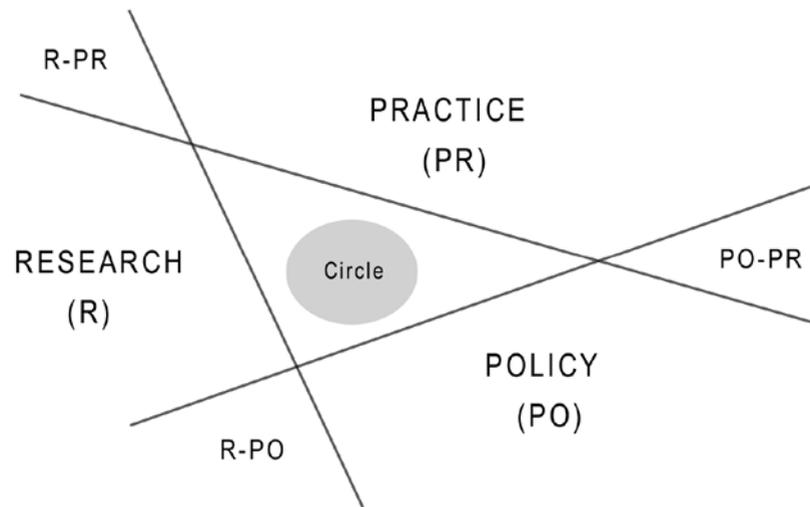


Figure 1: The Circle as a 'negotiable space'

The model suggests that participants 'negotiated' their participation in the Circle by accessing knowledge about the relationships between domains from others who have such understandings and can communicate them. At the outset, the relationships of research, policy and practice were problematic and had to be worked out by the Circle 'inhabitants', leading them to make connections between different domains of knowledge.

These connections, understood as mutual or two-way, include relationships between the domains of policy-practice (PO-PR, right hand side) where some participants have understandings of what policy is currently demanding of ACE practitioners and how, in turn, policy needs to reflect and respond to practice. Similarly, there are research-policy connections (R-PO, left hand bottom), or knowledge of the ways that research engages with policy agendas and, in turn, how policy deploys appropriate research. Finally, there are research-practice connections, (R-PR, left hand top) including knowledge about what research can say about ACE culture and practice and how research can engage with the field's agendas.

The Circle thus represents a virtual web of knowledge relationships. At an early stage, this rich potential of the 'space' may seem ill defined for the participants. The meanings of the Circle are hazy, and it may not be clear to them what professional knowledges need to come into play and how they might 'apply'. Later in the life of the Circle, the participants may more clearly perceive relationships between the different domains of knowledge. The work of the Circle then leads participants (if they wholeheartedly engage with the process) to develop new understandings and incorporate these in their professional perspectives.

### Explaining the efficacy of the Circles

This model can be employed to understand the dynamics of Circles and account for their efficacy as a means of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building.

First, it was critical how the Circle 'space' was to be given form and 'constituted' by its participants. Each Circle created boundaries and parameters as a social context set apart from the participants' usual 'life-worlds' of the university, bureaucracy and ACE organisation. This was accomplished through skilled structuring and facilitation by the researchers and managers. Through their interactions, the

participants progressively defined the 'space' in terms of shared understandings of 'what the Circles were about'.

Second, the knowledge and expertise of the facilitators (researchers and managers) was key. The facilitators were effective because they could draw on complex sets of understandings about the interactions of research, policy and practice in ACE, depicted in Figure 1, enabling them to mediate learning about the relationships of research, policy and practice. The researchers' expertise may be conceptualised as an integrated knowledge of these domains and their complex relationships – not merely their substantive research perspectives, but also their understandings of policy engagement and how research can work theoretically and empirically with policy problems. In commissioned research, researchers and policy-makers may develop reciprocal understandings of each other's work and what 'good' research for policy comprises (McIntyre & Wickert 2000). So too, on the strength of their deep knowledge of ACE culture and practice, all researchers had a grounded understanding of 'research relevances' – what research meanings might resonate most with ACE practitioners' understandings.

Third, the model suggests that it is the Circle's negotiable character that creates its potential as an effective change catalyst. The relationships between research, policy and practice have to be worked out by 'doing participatory action research'. As participants negotiate their participation, they review their taken-for-granted professional knowledge and identity and subject it to reflective inquiry. Effective change-management occurs when, for example, organisations begin to challenge typical and perhaps unquestioned situations of practice (teaching and learning practices, ways of working with the local community and so on). The desire of many participants and their sponsoring organisations for renewal set such conditions for change.

Fourth, the model suggests how the knowledge, represented by the domains of research, policy and practice, is made available as

'subjective' sets of meanings that practitioners apply in situations of practice, in the performance of their roles as coordinators, managers, sessional tutor, teachers and so on. It is helpful to understand these 'meanings' as organised as a *professional perspective*, a concept fundamental to the sociology of occupations (e.g. Becker 1970), the social phenomenology of everyday life (Schutz 1976) and its applications to occupational analysis in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984).

A perspective organises a range of tacit and formal knowledges relevant to practice, not simply formal theory or academic knowledge (Becker 1970). In this view, an ACE practitioner's professional knowledge is organised in its relevance to typical situations. Change is effected via the modification of perspectives in novel or challenging situations, precisely the kind of experiences that the Circles triggered through their applied research and particularly through the engagement with colleagues in sponsoring organisations. Put another way, the Circles provided an experiential 'shake-up' of existing ideas, as well as an accommodation of new ideas from the research itself, leading to a sense of their 'whole approach' changing.

Fifth, it is crucial to appreciate that, in the Circle 'negotiable space', interactions among participants were maximised, promoting the collaboration of peers. Participants were exposed to others' perspectives and practice knowledge, developing their professional perspectives inter-subjectively in this way. Thus it is not surprising that the participants attached such significance to professional networking as a feature of their Circle experience. Recalling that ACE practitioners can be quite isolated in their organisations and in their work as part-time and sessional tutors, the Circles experience was effective because participants encountered others' perspectives through the processes of participatory inquiry.

### Professional knowledge and capacity-building in ACE

Some implications for questions of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in ACE can now be drawn from the Research Circles experience. It can be argued that the Circles were ‘virtuous’ in bringing together three conditions for the development of organisational capability in the ACE sector, three conditions that work together in a dynamic way (Figure 2).

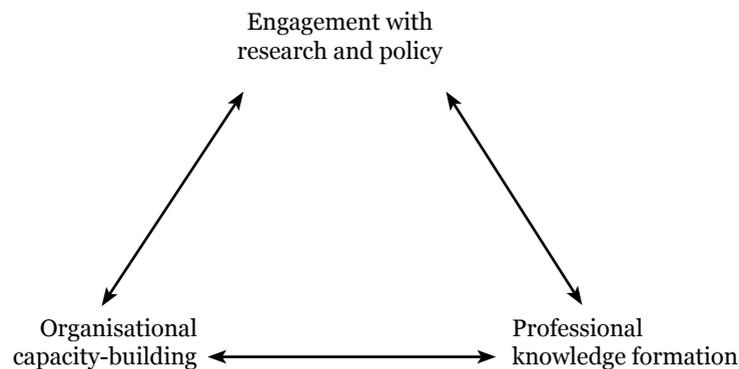


Figure 2: Engagement, professional knowledge and capacity

The *engagement* of practitioners with research and policy is a condition for the *formation* of new professional knowledge and expertise. This production of expertise through engagement with research and policy is in turn a condition for *building* the organisational capacity that enables a broader role for ACE. Taking this further, professional development occurs within the matrix of professional life and organisational capacity-building, understood as an essentially collegial rather than individual response to research and policy. Similarly, capacity-building may take direction from research and policy, but can only be realised through coherent professional development.

In stressing ‘engagement’ as a factor, it needs to be emphasised again that community education agencies are relatively independent of government, which cannot (as it may in public education) manage change more directly. Community agencies, with a strong component of voluntarism, cannot be bidden to implement public policy objectives. Rather, the challenge for public policy is to assist organisations in self-directed change within a framework that supports coherent development of the sector.

Thus, the Circles were deliberately designed to promote engagement of practitioners with research and policy knowledge through the ‘negotiable space’ at the intersection of these domains with their practice knowledge, making possible the generation of new professional knowledge (knowledge that is essentially relational). Retaining the expert researchers as Circle facilitators was crucial to engagement – they embodied research and policy knowledge and relationships, providing a rich resource on which practitioners could draw to generate their own understandings through their projects.

This analysis clearly accords significance to the discrete ‘domains’ of knowledge represented by research, policy and practice that the Circle process brought into productive relationship.<sup>2</sup> It is not merely that the Circles represent an extraordinary level of professional interaction in a context where typically ACE practitioners are professionally isolated. Equally, what was learned through the participatory research process was crucial, and the workable nature of the research has been mentioned already – its potential to generate new professional knowledge.

### Professional knowledge formation

Knowledge formation is the key to professional development in ACE, and goes hand in hand with organisational capacity-building. Public policy has been reluctant to recognise the problematic nature of professional knowledge and identity in the sector, originating in the

historical peculiarities of ACE. If expanding the social and economic role of ACE is a goal, then there will need to be more recognition that professional knowledge and organisational capability are mutually reinforcing, just as they can be mutually limiting.

The Circles demonstrated how professional knowledge can be developed through workplace inquiry and feed into organisational capability. First, they enabled the *creation of new knowledge* and understandings, when, for instance, participants developed their skills in researching their communities, in forming partnerships or in generating participation strategies to enhance the participation of certain groups. Second, they led to the *sharing of knowledge* through increased professional networking and interaction, when many participants chose to work with colleagues to review their teaching practices, leading to change in learning and assessment systems, and team approaches to programs. Thirdly, the Circles *validated existing knowledge*, particularly of experienced teachers and co-ordinators. In this last respect, the Circles indicate a potential avenue for formally recognising knowledge and skills in the ACE workforce, if the professional learning of the Circles can be linked to professional qualifications for those who desire this. The Circle model fits well with existing forms of credit for work-based learning in the programs of universities with expertise in adult and vocational education, as institutions are challenged to reconcile new conditions of knowledge formation with traditional structures of academic study leading to professional qualifications.

The professionalisation of the ACE workforce is a related issue. Not all practitioners will have an interest in or need for relevant qualifications, especially perhaps, experienced core staff in larger organisations. However, the theme of organisation renewal has its generational counterpart in the younger practitioners now entering the ACE field, particularly through the expansion of vocational education programs. The goal of a sustainable ACE sector implies a

greater commitment to developing professional identity and expertise into the future. The Circles can effectively serve such ends.

### **The Circles as organisational capacity-building**

The sponsoring organisations engaged, more or less fully, with the opportunities that the Circles presented, and among them were many of the sector's leaders in educational innovation. The desire for organisational change motivated some organisations to grasp the Circles as an opportunity to advance the process, including some ACE organisations looking for renewal, with the requirements of accredited training motivating some participants to use the experience of Circles to develop better systems.

Reiterating the challenge of promoting change in the relatively autonomous community sector, it is important to appreciate the necessity of a coherent policy framework for organisational development, such as the Victorian Ministerial Statement (and nationally, the Ministerial Declaration on ACE) provides. Similarly, this discussion has stressed that the strategic research provided practitioners with robust frameworks to guide their pursuit of new directions through professional collaboration. The discussion has stressed the wide range of professional knowledge found in ACE, including the expertise that is required to manage community organisations, to develop, promote and market programs, extending to knowledge of strategies for widening participation and encouraging the learning of particular client groups.

Reference has been made to the possibility for the Circles to effect change, modifying perspectives by creating novel situations. Through the medium of professional networking and heightened interaction of colleagues in their organisations (so highly valued by the participants), the Circles caused an experiential 'shake-up' of existing ideas. It can be readily appreciated how the Circles challenged professional knowledge and identity within the matrix

of organisational life, and how they supported change-management – when, for example, organisations begin to question their accepted culture, prevailing forms of practice, their ways of treating learners, ways of working with the local community and so on. In this way, the desire of many sponsoring organisations for renewal set a powerful motive for individuals to develop new perspectives on practice and so contribute to change.

### Conclusion

The Research Circles were successful because they created a unique space where participants could investigate the relationships of practice to research and policy. Their ‘negotiation’ of the Circle space gave them insight into knowledge relationships not normally available to practitioners. By promoting collaborative inquiry practice, they set up conditions for the formation of professional knowledge and expertise that is essential to building the organisational capacity envisaged in the Ministerial Statement’s goals for sustainable ACE organisations enabled to perform a broader community development role.

The Circles were able to activate this key dynamic of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building, by providing a means for ACE organisations to engage with research and policy. In this way, the Circles operated as an effective catalyst for educational innovation and organisational development, in a way that is appropriate to community-owned and managed organisations.

In this way, the Circles are significant in showing how the challenges of developing a sustainable ACE sector can be addressed in public policy, showing how change in relatively autonomous community agencies can be achieved at a time when a new wave of education and training reform promises continuing pressures for community education agencies to take an expanded role.

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## Notes

- 1 In the DEST paper, community education is defined as 'comprising not-for-profit community based organisations with a local or regional focus that offer adult learning programs'. The intention of the definition is, quite rightly, to demarcate a not-for-profit community sector as distinct from the publicly-funded TAFE systems and the private sector. However, it is all-encompassing and draws the boundary very wide, certainly and well beyond those organisations identified as 'adult and community education' since the 1980s. It would encompass all those not-for-profit organisations that provide adult education as part of their charter, but not as their primary reason for existence – for example, many sporting and cultural associations, religious or special interest bodies. A useful qualification is to refer to those not-for-profit organisations *whose primary purpose* is to deliver adult education and training to *the general community*.
- 2 It needs to be stressed that policy itself is a domain of knowledge, though this is often not well understood. The educational policy literature (e.g. Ball 1990, Marginson 1993, Hammersley 2004) has explored in some depth the way policy is enacted by 'policy actors' in educational settings including those conducting commissioned research for government. The high level research commissioned by the ACFE Board is an example of 'research-for-policy', where researchers are part of a policy process and contribute to policy knowledge.

## About the author

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## Houses and sheds in Australia: an exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings

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*This article reviews research into the genesis and spread of both neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Victoria and community-based men's sheds in Australia to identify some similarities and differences. Our article asks questions about the gendered communities of practice that underpin houses for women on the one hand, and sheds for men on the other. Our particular interest is with the gender issues associated with the development of the relatively mature neighbourhood house 'sector', and those associated with the very recent and developing community-based men's sheds 'sector'. Our underpinning research question has to do with the desirability (or otherwise) in each of these sectors of political and strategic decisions being either gender specific or gender neutral. We identify a number of tantalising parallels between the rationale behind the establishment of both sectors, for women and men, albeit in very different circumstances, along with some obvious differences.*

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## Introduction and context for the article

This article is written at a time in 2008 when neighbourhood houses and learning centres (referred to in this article as neighbourhood houses), catering primarily for women, are well established, having been in existence as an organised association in Victoria (and elsewhere in Australia) for over 30 years. By contrast, community-based men's sheds in Australia catering primarily for men (which we will, for simplicity throughout the rest of this article, refer to as 'men's sheds') are a new and relatively recent phenomenon. Almost all such men's sheds have been in existence for less than ten years, with national and Victorian associations forming only very recently (in 2007). For that reason, there is a better and longer documentary and academic record of the development of neighbourhood houses than of the development of men's sheds. Our comparison, whilst it provides some tantalising parallels and obvious differences, is limited by the relative immaturity, in developmental terms, of community-based men's sheds and, because of their unique nature, their lack of obvious parallels.

The particular interest in this article is with the gender issues associated with the development of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds. Our research question has to do with the desirability (or otherwise) in each sector of being either gender specific or gender neutral. Our article is an exploration of the complex, strategic political choices that have been made around gender. One choice is to be overtly gender specific and therefore have neighbourhood houses for women and sheds for men. A second choice is to be gender neutral and de-emphasise gender as part of an inclusive politics. The naming of a house as a neighbourhood house and a shed as a community shed would reflect this second position. These choices can be paramount when consequent educational decisions and strategies are developed relating to the design and establishment of learning environments, pedagogies and programs conducive for women, men or both.

Our essential purpose in writing and raising these questions is to assist both sectors to recognise what we see as the importance and desirability of catering informally, in community contexts, for men's *and* women's different needs for learning and wellbeing, sometimes in different places and spaces. We are particularly interested in critically unmasking some of the unspoken gender issues involved in both sheds and houses in community contexts.

It is important to recognise at the outset that, while neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community contexts can be located within and studied as a part of the broad Australian adult and community education sector, both can be located elsewhere for the purposes of analysis. Both are diverse in terms of the types of organisations that auspice them: many do not have learning, particularly formal learning, as their primary role. Because they both tend to focus wholistically on individual and community well-being rather than learning *per se*, many neighbourhood houses and men's sheds can equally be regarded also as health, leisure, social support, community development, cultural or recreation organisations.

Since both are regarded for convenience of analysis in this article as adult and community education (ACE) organisations, it is important to work out where they fit within an Australian ACE typology. What makes such a categorisation more complex is that ACE is differently organised in each Australian state and defined in different ways by practitioners, community members, states, territories and government bodies (Foley 2007; Golding, Davies & Volkoff 2001). Because ACE is defined differently in each state, so too is the role of each state's neighbourhood house sector.

McCrae (2001) recognised three categories for ACE. The first of these, 'community owned ACE', not only includes neighbourhood houses that we focus on in this article, but also University of the Third Age (U3A) and Indigenous learning organisations. McCrae's second category, 'ACE/TAFE organisations', tend to be found in states such

as Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia where there is less funding and emphasis on the first category. These include non-accredited programs run by TAFE such as foundation, general education, further education and recreational programs. McCrae's third category, 'universal adult education' (p.1), includes all other community education. This category, as Foley (2005: 2) notes, 'can include self-directed learning, local clubs and societies, museums, national parks, social movements and public education campaigns'. It also includes more recently recognised, important, informal learning sites for men, through volunteer fire brigades (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2004) and many community-based men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* 2007).

### **A brief history of the development of neighbourhood houses and learning centres for women in Victoria**

#### Neighbourhood houses

Kimberley (1998: 21) noted that 'by 1976, twelve centres, which had discovered both each other's existence and their commonalities of belief and purpose, formed a coalition to approach the government for support for their activities'. The first network of neighbourhood houses was established in 1978 with a 'peak body, the Association of Neighbourhood Learning Centres (later known as the Association of Neighbourhood House and Learning Centres) formed in 1979' (ANHLC 2003: 1). Initially most houses and centres were operated by community-based management, staffed through significant volunteer involvement and received very little government funding. While many were primarily focused on community development, some, such as Diamond Valley Learning Centre, Mountain District Learning Centre (formerly Mountain District Women's Cooperative) and Nunawading Neighbourhood Centre, sprang from a commitment to provide community-based education opportunities for women.

The ANHLC (2003: 1) estimated that there were one thousand neighbourhood and community houses throughout Australia. However, these vary greatly among states and territories in their focus on provision of services. The first neighbourhood houses and learning centres sprang up in Victoria in the early 1970s, as ANHLC (2003: 1) observed, 'from the grass roots out of local community need, particularly the isolation of women in the community' as well as to 'provide an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment that supported individualised learning' (p.1). In this sense they are very similar to men's sheds.

#### Background about where neighbourhood houses sit within ACE

Foley (2005: 3) provides evidence that neighbourhood houses comprise only one reasonably recent innovation in the non-Indigenous history of adult education in Victoria. According to the 2004 Victorian Government Ministerial Statement on ACE:

Adult Community Education has a proud history, beginning in 1839 with the foundation of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institutes. Other milestones were the opening of the Council of Adult Education (now CAE) in 1947; the provision of the first Adult Migrant Education Service (now the Adult Multicultural Education Services) in 1951; the opening of neighbourhood houses in the 70s; and the proclamation of the Adult, Community and Further Education Act [in Victoria] in 1991. Today there are 450 community-owned and managed organisations eligible to deliver adult community education programs across the community of Victoria (Kosky 2004: 5).

Foley (2005: 3) observed that neighbourhood houses have formed an important part of ACE in Victoria since the 1970s by meeting community needs and offering an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment for people to gather and participate in community-based education. Foley notes that, during the 1970s, the strength of ACE was through the notion of grass roots community,

giving opportunities for local people to ‘gather in a social setting and participate in community life’ (p.3).

During this time, the (then) Whitlam government in Australia established the Australian Assistance Plan (AAP), funded to promote policies that focused on local community consultation. At that time the main themes coming from community houses and learning centres was empowerment of the individual, caring and sharing (Buckingham, Aldred & Clark 2004). While there are fragments of the original AAP model remaining in the culture and philosophy of ACE, by 2008 there had been a significant shift towards skills-based, vocational learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are focused on policy priorities that step in line with Australian VET (vocational education and training) policy reform. Many of these trends in ACE are reflected in trends in those neighbourhood houses that are also ACE providers.

### **A recent history of the development of men’s sheds in community contexts in Australia**

Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) have identified a rapid and remarkable growth in community-based men’s sheds in Australia, most of it in the five years prior to 2007. Very few sheds existed beyond personal backyard sheds ten years ago. To 2006, sheds were most common in regions, suburbs and states in southern Australia where the proportion of men, particularly men over 65 years of age, were more likely than in other locations not to be in paid work. Being essentially grassroots in their origins like neighbourhood houses, community-based men’s sheds have grown in somewhat different ways in different states and regions and have tended to take on many of the characteristics of the earliest or best known ‘iconic’ sheds developed in each state. For example, there are more sheds associated with aged care facilities and war veterans organisations in South Australia, and with adult and community education and

health centres in Victoria and with churches in New South Wales. Not surprisingly, shed practice has typically been learnt from the experience of similar sheds nearby and in the same state. Unlike at the time of the development of neighbourhood houses in the 1970s, the advent of the internet in the past decade has made the sharing of information between shed organisations somewhat more immediate. As an example, the Lane Cove Men’s Shed (in New South Wales) has mentored a number of sheds on-line in other states.

Illustrating the consequence of the separate development and different origins of sheds in different states, we have found significant differences in participant surveys between the five states based on data from Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* (2007). The highly significant differences<sup>1</sup> observed included comfort with women participating in the shed ( $p < 0.001$ ), attitudes towards the positive health attributes of the shed ( $p < 0.007$ ), the likelihood of the need for support in getting to the shed ( $p < 0.001$ ), the likelihood of being referred to the shed by a health or welfare worker ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the likelihood of the participant having a leadership role in the shed ( $p < 0.003$ ). In each case, the observed, highly significant differences are largely demographic, as a consequence of the different ways in which sheds have targeted different men in different states from different shed models.

Hayes’ and Williamson’s (2007) Victorian shed typology identified at least five different community shed types: occupational, clinical, recreational, educational and social, with somewhat different ethos and function as well as instrumental and emotional support. As Hayes and Williamson stress, ‘since all men are not alike, neither are the sheds that they prefer’ (p.60). It is important to remember that

<sup>1</sup> Significant differences are established using a statistical Chi square test. The probability (p) of the observed survey result being significantly different due to chance is expressed as a number less than one. A very small probability (p less than 0.01) is regarded as highly significant.

community-based sheds, despite a decade of practice and experience in some individual sheds, are still in an early stage of development in terms of innovation, development and particularly in terms of government policy and funding.

Not surprisingly, we have previously observed (Golding & Harvey 2006) many significant differences between diverse shed types and characteristics and the demographic background of the men who use them. Despite national community shed diversity, the issues men tend to face as participants in sheds across states are otherwise very similar. For example no significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were observed between states in terms of participant attitudes towards the shed they participated in. For example, men felt similarly positive (90%+ agreement) about the shed as a place to meet new friends, get out of the house and to keep them healthy. Many of these reasons for participating in sheds are shared by women in community houses.

### **What do neighbourhood houses and men's sheds claim to do?**

Before more closely examining the gender issues, we turn to what Victorian neighbourhood house and Australian men's sheds associations claim to do in 2008 via their respective public websites. According to the website of the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (2008):

Neighbourhood Houses are known by many different names. These names include: Community Houses, Living and Learning Centres, Neighbourhood Centres, Learning Centres. Whatever the name, these places are local organisations that provide social, educational and recreational activities for their communities in a welcoming supportive environment. Neighbourhood houses are managed by volunteer committees and paid staff. They offer many opportunities for volunteer participation in all aspects of the house activities and management. Good quality affordable childcare and playgroups are offered at most houses. Activities are generally run at low or no cost to participants. Activities offered could include:

English as a second language, Handling credit for people with disabilities, Children's art classes, Gentle exercise for over 50s, Yoga, Men's health and well-being, Singing, Gardening, Introduction to computers, Internet and email access, Car mechanics for women, and much more!!

According to the Australian Men's Sheds Association (2008) website:

There's nothing new about men gathering together in their own space to talk, share skills, swap ideas, solve problems or just discuss life in general – it's been happening since the beginning of time. There's nothing new either about men spending time in their backyard shed – an acknowledged Aussie pastime. What is new is that men, particularly retired men, are combining these two activities in a communal space simply called a 'Men's Shed'. What is also new is how strongly men have embraced this new identity – being a member of a Men's Shed. Men's Sheds, as such, are a peculiarly Australian phenomenon. In the past decade, a wide range of community-based Men's Sheds has sprung up – each with its own unique identity and purpose. Activities within Sheds are many and various: woodwork, metalwork, restoration of old cars, portable Sheds taken to Alzheimer facilities or mobile Sheds for remote country areas. The membership is diverse too. Men from all backgrounds, ethnic and social mixes can enjoy a Men's Shed, bringing their unique cultural characteristics to enliven the activities.

The common theme in all Sheds is about men feeling useful and contributing again to their communities, learning or sharing their skills, making friends, networking and availing themselves of health information programmes and opportunities. Men's Sheds are under the auspices of a variety of organisations whose ethos they tend to exemplify. Communities are keen to provide activity, identity and meaning for vast numbers of older, unemployed, job-redundant, 'downsized', isolated, depressed and happily retired, active, creative, enthusiastic men. Men's Sheds are fast being recognized as vital, viable places to fulfil these needs and provide relaxed, happy creative spaces for men to enjoy.

In summary, while the Victorian neighbourhood house sector acknowledges the broad range of names used to describe their providers and de-emphasises gender in terms of its diverse programs, the emphasis is on activities for people in the 'house' which often flow into the community. By contrast, the Australian men's shed peak body repeatedly emphasises men as the targeted participants, gathering as active participants in the 'men's shed' and contributing to the community.

### **Some gender issues associated with neighbourhood houses**

There is no room in this article to provide an extended account of the complex gender issues associated with neighbourhood houses in Victoria. At the risk of over-simplifying, we will look briefly at research in successive decades from 1976 to the present to identify some recurrent gender issues. It is interesting to note that there has been more extensive exploration of the history of these centres as places for learning than as places for community development. This may be because they organised initially for political purposes focused on attempts to secure funds to support alternative models of education for women.

Lonsdale (1993: 71) observed that the initiators of the first 'learning centre' (in Diamond Valley in 1973) were overwhelmingly 'women demanding access to educational opportunities', with learning environments specifically reflecting women's needs, including provision of child care, class times in hours that fitted in with school children, and graded class fees. It is interesting to note that, although Diamond Valley operated from a community base and collective principles, its approach to community development was education-based rather than sociological. As Kimberley (1998: 12–13) observed, at that time '[s]ociety generally did not regard women's education as important or even desirable ...'. Reflecting critically in 1998 on the apparent dilemma posed by this early, deliberate

emphasis on women, and despite the stated aim of the Diamond Valley centre on 'openness, community [and] acceptance' (Lonsdale 1993: 45), Kimberley (1998, p.13) asks 'how an organisation with a feminist focus could be committed to the ideals inherent in the notion of including all members of a community'. Lonsdale (1993: 71) succinctly frames this early dilemma for feminism by noting that for some feminists,

... 'female domination' is a cause for celebration as women take up leadership roles and gain control over their lives in new and exciting ways; for others it is not female domination that is needed, but a balance between male and female values, and thus places like the Centre need to offer men the chance to be influenced by values associated with nurturing and cooperation.

By 1976 there were twelve neighbourhood centres in Victoria, which (somewhat like men's sheds by the time of the first national conference in Lakes Entrance in 2005) had 'discovered both each other's existence and their commonalities of belief and purpose [and] formed a coalition to approach the government for support for their activities' (Kimberley 1998: 21). The neighbourhood centres prepared a paper noting characteristics which, they felt, distinguished them from other organisations currently providing adult or further education. This was the first public announcement of their commonalities of belief and purpose. Kimberley observed that the document these centres prepared for this purpose in large part 'reflected the women's liberation movement's commitment to raising the status of women and to what progressive educators were espousing at the time' (p.23). Kimberley (1998: 23) noted that the statement to the Minister only included the word 'women' once, despite the fact that the neighbourhood centres, by ANHLC's (October 1976 Archive Documents) admission, had been 'largely established by, and predominantly for women'.

While in practice women have since consistently comprised the vast majority of workers and participants in most neighbourhood

houses, there has tended to be a deliberate de-emphasis of gender (gender neutrality) in its public and policy face. Kimberley (1986), in a comprehensive study of Victorian 'community providers', concluded that participants 'are predominantly women who have not completed secondary education' (p.3) and that the sector was specifically targeted towards 'catering positively for extended non-earners' (p.5). Other data in Kimberley (1986: 5) confirmed that a route to vocational education through a community provider was around six times as likely in some regions of Victoria for women than it was for men. The 1986 view of enhancing such well-used 'pathways' for women through community providers was consistent with the (then) Victorian State Premier John Cain's social justice policy (Cain 1986). It included specific reference to developing employment programs to ensure that 'those who have been non-earners for extended periods (e.g. women who have been rearing children) are not excluded but are positively catered for' (Cain 1986, cited in Kimberley 1986: 9).

In considering Kimberley's study, it should be noted that community providers and neighbourhood houses should not necessarily be confounded. Some place a greater emphasis on education in a community setting. Others focus more strongly on community development while others consolidate the two perspectives. While all fifteen organisations that responded to Kimberley's survey offered learning activities, there was considerable variation in the emphasis they put on formal versus informal or non-formal learning. Moreover, eleven of the fifteen organisations surveyed did not offer education as a major activity, but were more specifically focused on community development and regarded themselves primarily as a community of neighbourhood houses.

In 1990 the ANHLC undertook an exhaustive and collaborative consultation process to develop a comprehensive *Statement of Philosophy and Practice* which, other than indirectly, was again silent

on the role of women. As Kimberley (1998) summarised, missing from this comprehensive statement was

... any specific reference to women despite their comprising more than 80 per cent of the cohort of workers, volunteers and group participants. The opposition of views among Neighbourhood Houses about explicit reference to women was an issue too conflictual to resolve except by omission.

As Gribble and Davidson (1991: 138) observed, women remained the 'invisible owners' of neighbourhood houses.

Despite their continuing, almost complete, omission from ANHLC's subsequent formally stated philosophies and practices, women's involvement and needs have clearly continued to play a critically important role in the development and maintenance of the neighbourhood house sector in Australia. As an illustration, nowhere in the body of the ANHLC (2003) *Sector Framework*, including in its sector 'Purpose', 'Philosophy' and 'Practice' statements, are women or gender mentioned. The document, created collaboratively by a Working Party of nine women, and informed by comment from six other women, stresses in its Sector Principles the need 'to ensure fair and equitable access to **all** people' (their emphasis, p.4). Within the 2003 ANHLC Practice Statement (p.6), it is emphasised that

People come to neighbourhood houses because they are local, accessible, welcoming and non-threatening, and because programs are designed to meet the needs of participants and prospective participants.

The only point where gender is mentioned or alluded to is on the 'Sector Practice Diagrams' where, consistent with the stated delivery principles of flexibility, adaptiveness, responsiveness and inclusiveness (p.6), 'Men's sheds' and 'Women's Groups' are included within a long list of possible delivery options.

In a more recent, comprehensive (55 page) study of outcomes of the neighbourhood house and learning sector (Humpage 2005), there

is again an emphasis on principles of community participation and ownership, empowerment, lifelong learning, access, equity and inclusion, social action, advocacy, networking and self-help. There is again a silence about women. Consistent with the equal access theme, gender (women or men) is not mentioned directly. In the conclusion there is only a brief and passing mention of ‘women’s groups’ when discussing the importance of houses and centres to create an environment, where people

work and take recreation together, forming bonds from which they obtain something personally or collectively. This is done by creating and building communities of interest, such as playgroups, women’s groups, support groups, community lunches and walking groups. (p.46)

### **Some gender issues associated with community based men’s sheds**

Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) broached the question of the desirable role of women in the evolving Australian men’s sheds movement. In this section we draw heavily on some of that research, informed in turn by our field research (Golding Brown, Foley *et al.* 2007) to confirm that women **do** play a vital and invaluable role in shed organisations and in the support of men attending sheds. As an example, in many of the sheds that we studied, women played a vital role in securing funds for the shed. The key to women’s effective role in sheds appears, from our research findings, to acknowledge that there are times when men need, for their own, their families’, and the wider communities’ sake, to share positively the regular company and friendship of other men. As is the case for men associated with neighbourhood houses, it is apparent that women know how and when to take a step back, but also to acknowledge that they are often invaluable to the organisation’s wider success.

While our research identifies older men as the primary beneficiaries of community shed practice, men’s partners typically actively encourage them to participate. Female partners, along with their

men who regularly use sheds, get respite from ‘underfoot syndrome’: the phenomenon of a couple both being at home full-time together, often but not always in retirement. This contrasts with attitudes of women’s partners toward neighbourhood houses, at least earlier in their history, who often found them very threatening. As Kimberley (1998: 13) put it: ‘Society generally did not regard women’s education as important or even desirable and many women avoided telling their husbands about their participation, scraping the fees out of their housekeeping allowances’. We have also found evidence of the critical importance of female professionals in setting up and supporting community-based men’s sheds, particularly their role in obtaining the necessary funding. Golding, Foley and Brown (2007) found little evidence of animosity towards women and plenty of evidence of welcoming inclusion. There was little evidence in our interviews of misogyny (a dislike of women).

However, there are differences of opinion amongst participants as to the most appropriate and effective role women should play as participants in community shed practice. One third of sheds we studied were ‘men only’. Another one third of sheds tolerated women as participants, effectively on the condition that they not inhibit the opportunity for men to feel relaxed in the shed setting. A further one third of sheds would theoretically admit women as equal participants (though few did), but tended to say they did in order not to fall foul of what they (wrongly) perceived to be equal opportunity legislation that made affirmative action towards men illegal.

### Sheds and masculinities

There has been considerable recent interest in academic circles about where men’s sheds might fit generally in terms of gender relations with women and specifically in terms of masculinities. There has been a tendency in some feminist discourse to go further than (accurately) acknowledging men generally as having inappropriately held *most* of the power in *most* societies, to (inaccurately) identify *all* men

as negative in relation to *all* women. Whatever the merits of such arguments, there is acceptance that men generally may benefit from existing gender relations. Yet Karoski (2007: 86–87) accurately recognises the complexities of the masculinities crisis when he writes that

... both adherence to and rejection of hegemonic masculinity comes at serious costs to men. These include anxiety and depressive disorders, suicide and attempted suicide, physical illness, certain criminal behaviours, violence and differences in the mortality rate between men and women. For a number of years now, the masculinity crisis has emerged in public discourse to reflect the costs associated with masculinity.

Throughout this discussion, and Golding and associates' other recently published papers, we have deliberately taken to talking more about *men* than masculinities. Our reason is that, as Karoski's (2007: 70) informants argued in his study of men's movements in Australia, '[i]f the concept of masculinity indicates a concern with the nature of manhood and the object of concern is men, then why not talk about men?' Where we **do** refer to or cite 'negative hegemonic masculinity', as in Karoski's quote above, we are using it in the terms of Donaldson (1993) as it refers to a particular (and we would argue, inaccurately global) stereotyping of all men by means of a negative and hyper-masculine paradigm. That paradigm includes 'homophobia, misogyny and domestic patriarchy' (Connell 1995: 218), as well as 'aggression, ambition, competition, individualism, self-sufficiency and heterosexuality' (Telford 1996: 130). We specifically reject such a paradigm in the current research about community-based men's sheds because it simply does not fit the research evidence.

Importantly, men typically involved as participants in community-based men's sheds are not coming to sheds from the men's movement generally, nor from any one of the three typical Australian 'men's movement' positions identified and discussed by Karoski (2007).

Once their positions **are** analysed using our research data, men participating are not accurately or easily described in Karoski's terms as 'Profeminists' (male activists working in support of feminism), 'Mythopoetics' (with a focus on personal healing for men through men's ritual) nor 'Father's rights' advocates (with a focus on divorce and custody), though a small number of men hold some of these positions. As a group, men's shed practitioners come closest to holding views consistent with what Karoski's (2007) typology calls 'Inclusives', accepting that

It is essential to the well-being of the whole society that men make themselves healthier and more fulfilled. They also argue that, until men make themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, the whole society will not function well because men still hold the hegemonic position in society.' (p. 216).

Men's sheds practitioners and participants do not generally attribute their problems to women generally or to femininity in particular. As bell hooks (1992: 565) notes, while most poorer, older, working class men who use sheds have been socialised by the sexist ideology of male privilege, in reality they have had few, if any, such privileges bestowed on them. Karoski (2007) expresses it in this way:

Poor working class men, more than any other, are caught up in the contradiction of masculinity. They have been brought up to adhere to the masculine ideal but are not able to live up to it. (p. 93)

Or as Donaldson (1991) puts it, 'working class men have basically one asset to market – their bodily capacity to labour – and their bodies are, over time, consumed by the labour they do' (cited in Connell 2000: 187). In essence, as Karoski (2007: 92) explains,

Working class men have experienced the masculinity crisis most acutely because of their strong adherence to traditional masculinity. ... Now working class men feel alienated, frustrated and angry because they no longer feel secure with themselves as men.

Men not in paid work are particularly alienated since they are no longer able to be a provider and head of a household. Such men, if also living on their own, are particularly isolated and potentially vulnerable. In several senses, men's sheds are about men seeking a brotherhood or 'mateship' with other men to cease to be isolated. The regular, shed-based practice provides an acceptable pretext for participating, meeting and informally discussing and resolving several of the contradictions imposed on them by the inappropriateness of labelling them with 'negative hegemonic masculinity'. Crudely, while some men are bastards, not all men are bastards, and very few men who currently use men's sheds appear, from our research evidence, to be bastards or to dislike women. What they particularly enjoy, for at least some of their week, is the social company of other men. They seldom seek to scapegoat or settle a score with women. As one of Karoski's informants put it (when talking about the men's movement and men's gatherings in Australia), the general purpose of men's sheds can be likened not to challenging

... some visible or invisible enemy, but introspection and self-reflection. The focus is on gaining a better understanding of who [they] are as men; as men in society, as fathers, as husbands, as lovers, identifying and addressing men's emotional needs, and learning to relate in a non-domineering and exploitative way. (Karoski 2007: 286–7)

The difference from previous and existing men's movements in Australia is that sheds in community settings provide a new, safe, neutral and acceptable place at the level of community and neighbourhood for men to meet, socialise and contribute regularly and positively to their communities. While essentially and mostly for working class men who are not in paid work, they are not tinged with some of the negative and hegemonic connotations seen to be associated with men who have traditionally met and socialised in hotels and in sporting venues in Australia. What is new and effective about sheds in community contexts is that the hands-on activity in

the workshop setting becomes a publicly acceptable, shared pretext for older men to meet, usually with women's active support.

### A summary of some parallels and differences

The similarities, differences and likely future trends that we identify below are necessarily tentative given that they are based on separate research into independent developments in different sectoral contexts approximately two decades apart.

#### Some parallels

On the basis of the literature we have reviewed, we identify some tantalising parallels between the grassroots development of neighbourhood houses in the mid-1970s and community men's sheds since the mid-1990s. While the sectors developed separately in different contexts at least 20 years apart, what they share is a commitment to the different needs of women (in the case of neighbourhood houses) and men (in the case of men's sheds).

Both neighbourhood *houses* and men's *sheds* identify the preferred territory for establishing their communities of practice. Neither has been able, at least overtly in public spaces funded in part by governments committed to gender equity, to promote one particular form of masculinity or femininity. Sheds (mainly for men) and houses (mainly for women) in community contexts are simultaneously both conservative and revolutionary. On the one hand, they both reinforce the status quo of gender stereotypical roles – of houses as places for women and sheds as places for men. On the other hand, they are revolutionary in that they both draw lines in the gender sand and recognise there are times and places where some women and some men benefit from gendered communities of practice. To borrow from and paraphrase Neville and Kennedy (1983: 122), both neighbourhood houses and sheds,

In their acceptance of biology **and** of women's [men's] activities for their own sakes, [are revolutionary in that they] have

provided an altogether new position from which women [men] may examine and possibly question the alternatives which are available to them in terms of their current role and future aspirations.

One other broad similarity is the demographic of men who tend to use sheds and women who use neighbourhood houses. Perhaps more so than for women who participate in neighbourhood houses, men's sheds' participants, particularly those men referred by health workers to sheds, including the half of men who have few other community affiliations, tend to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The difference is that men who use sheds tend to be considerably older (median age 65), more likely to be rural and less likely to be middle class or 'ordinary suburban' as described by Kimberley (1998: 50).

In terms of the preferred pedagogies there are close parallels. Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.* (2007) identify preferred pedagogies of men in sheds that are very similar to those described for community providers in Kimberley (1986: 32). Kimberley emphasises that community providers provide time and space for reassessing a participant's life and directions and offering support for making changes and taking risks. As for men in sheds, women in neighbourhood houses, as Kimberley describes, are encouraged through their participation to suffer no loss of face or self-esteem, to move in and out of learning experiences, to learn as well as teach, to match their learning with changing stages in their lives to take control of their own learning. Finally but importantly, both emphasise success 'as the development of confidence, growth, fulfilment and increased contribution to society in a number of ways' (Kimberley 1986: 34).

#### Some differences

We identify several important differences. The main and obvious one is that women have been unable or unwilling to effectively and officially claim their house space or sector as gendered other than

through practice. It is interesting to ask why this is so. Whatever the answer, unlike in most (but not all) men's sheds where men in each shed effectively decide whether women are welcome, explicit reference to mainly (or only) women as participants in neighbourhood houses has been too conflictual to resolve. While women remain the invisible owners, and in recent times have extended a new and significant hand to men through neighbourhood houses in all Australian states, their parallel commitment to access and equity for all has prevented them, unlike for men, from formally claiming or gendering the space.

We also suggest that the women who worked to establish neighbourhood houses and learning centres were apparently more overtly political than the men who recently set up or participate in men's sheds. The 1970s and 80s was an era of women feeling oppressed by the role they were cast by society. They wanted not only equality with men but also for women's knowledge and processes to be equally valued or even more highly valued than the hierarchical structures of organisation and education which constituted the norm. Ironically it is these feminist values and processes, providing time and space for reassessing a participant's life and directions and offering support for making changes and taking risks, that underpin the model common to most if not all men's sheds.

#### Some likely future trends

It remains to be seen how men in sheds will, in the longer term, formally address the role of women in their relatively new and embryonic sector. To date women are accepted as important stakeholders in sheds, including as managers and facilitators, as well as partners who typically benefit from men's separate, regular practice. What we observe to date is that most men's sheds are tending to adopt organisational principles akin to those of feminism, as reflected indirectly in neighbourhood houses via the ANHLC (2003) principles. These principles tend to be non-hierarchical

and include community ownership, community participation, empowerment, access and equity, lifelong learning, inclusion, networking, advocacy, self-help and social action.

## Conclusions

Our comparison raises a number of new, unanswered and tantalising questions about the nature and effectiveness of gendered spaces in community settings, their link to health and well-being and the value of such spaces for community connectedness in both neighbourhood houses and men's sheds alike. Only some of the questions we set out to answer have been addressed in this brief article. We conclude that both neighbourhood houses and community-based men's sheds in Australia come out of grassroots community practice. They provide women and men separately and respectively with effective communities of regular, cooperative, hands-on practice particularly conducive to informal learning. They are very well suited to the needs of women and men not in paid work and to the development of gender-specific friendship networks developed through such regular activity in trusting communities of practice. These gendered communities of practice appear from our research to be particularly appropriate and effective for women and men with poor self-images as learners as a consequence of negative prior learning, life and/or work experiences.

In the case of neighbourhood houses, the early rationale about being primarily for women broadened over time to become gender inclusive in terms of policy, while the pedagogies and programs have tended still to cater mainly for women. There has been a tendency amongst those writing about neighbourhood houses to write in a strategic, policy-focused style that de-emphasises gender, adopts inclusivity and appears as gender neutral. Nevertheless those writing in a research-orientated genre for academic purposes about both houses and sheds tend to be more overtly and explicitly gender-specific. While it is too

early to predict what eventual gender trajectory community-based men's sheds might take, they are tending in 2008 towards being named and operated as men's spaces.

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## Listening to individual voices and stories – the mature-age student experience

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*This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project, part of a doctoral thesis, which examines the impact of university study on a group of 20 female and male mature-age students at the University of Newcastle, Australia, who have entered university via a non-traditional pathway. These students are in the second to final years of their undergraduate degree programs and have all faced significant hurdles in gaining university entrance and continuing with their studies. The majority have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with little, if any, family history of higher education and little positive experience of prior study. This paper gives voice to their stories – their triumphs and achievements as well as their struggles – and highlights the important role that publicly funded institutions can play, not only in widening access to higher education, but also in encouraging and assisting students from a diverse range of backgrounds to participate fully in higher education and achieve their goals.*

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This paper describes a ‘work in progress’ – a research project exploring the experiences of women and men along their journey as mature-age university students. The research will form the basis of a doctoral thesis which the author is undertaking with the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.

The research is qualitative, primarily from a narrative perspective, and has involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 mature-age students in the second to final years of their degree program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, having entered university through a non-traditional pathway. Eighteen of the students entered university via the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program, one entered via the STAT (Standard Tertiary Aptitude Test) and one achieved university entrance through RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning).

### **How did it all begin?**

The idea of conducting formal research to explore the experiences of mature-age students arose directly from my interest and experience as a student counsellor within a university setting. For the previous ten years, I had been providing a counselling service to students at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle. This Campus has a particularly high proportion of mature-age students, mostly female, and through my professional work I had been hearing the personal stories of many of these students (Stone 1999). Their stories were overwhelmingly ones of courage in the face of adversity. Most had faced significant challenges and difficulties in their journeys toward becoming university students and in their efforts to continue with and succeed with their studies. Female mature-age students were over-represented, both amongst the student population as a whole and amongst those using the counselling service. Therefore, I became more familiar with the women’s stories. However, the men’s stories that I did hear also tended to be ones of struggle, determination

and courage. The difference was that they usually talked of more support – from families, from female partners and from workplaces.

Undoubtedly, mature-age students face a range of hurdles to overcome in returning to study, particularly at the higher education level, and the personal stories of those seeking assistance through the counselling service bore this out. Women with whom I talked in my role as a counsellor often seemed to be particularly disadvantaged, as they struggled with balancing their roles of wife, mother and student, often with little confidence in their academic abilities. Many had little support from partners and families. In many cases, their studies were perceived as being secondary to their other responsibilities or, indeed, as a kind of ‘leisure’ activity. However, despite this level of struggle, another common feature amongst these students, both female and male, was the strong sense of personal achievement, a growing confidence and a new sense of identity and purpose. No matter the difficulties, it was all worth it. As a counsellor, I was privileged to hear these stories and to witness the changes that occurred in these students’ sense of themselves, as a direct result of being at university.

Through this process of talking with so many mature-age students, in a counselling setting, about their experiences, I began to wonder to what extent the stories of those students presenting at the counselling service were reflective of the experiences of mature-age students in general. I was aware that it could be helpful to higher education institutions to have a clearer understanding of the particular issues facing mature-age students, in order that they can be most appropriately supported to enter university, succeed and graduate.

### **The setting**

As a regional university, the University of Newcastle attracts a relatively high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at both of its two main campuses. The Ourimbah Campus in particular has a high proportion of mature-age students

from low socio-economic backgrounds. The University as a whole has a strong equity focus on supporting its low socio-economic students of all ages. It is located on the east coast of Australia in the state of New South Wales and has an enrolment of approximately 24,000 students, mostly located at two main campuses. The larger campus caters for around 18,000 students and is located within the city of Newcastle itself, about 160 kilometres north of Sydney. The smaller campus hosts around 3,500 university students and is located at Ourimbah, about halfway between Sydney and Newcastle, in an area of the coastline known as the NSW Central Coast.

The majority of Australian universities define a mature-age student as any student aged 21 or over. However, a significant number of mature-age students are aged in their thirties, forties or even fifties, who have not been in any formal education for perhaps ten to fifteen years or more. Cullity (2006) tells us that ‘without an alternative entry route to university, university is not possible for some adults’ and ‘to re-dress this concern ... 13 of the nation’s 44 universities conduct alternative entry programs (AEPs) for mature students’ (p. 177). These alternative entry programs include specific enabling programs (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001) which are designed to help prospective mature-age students gain university entry requirements. Those students without the necessary pre-requisites to apply directly for entry into a degree program at university (for example, those who did not matriculate from high school at the required standard) can apply to undertake such an enabling program.

Universities can apply to the (former) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training for funding to assist them to run enabling programs (Chadwick 2007) but it is up to the University to decide whether to charge fees to the students. On the basis of their results in the enabling program, students can apply for a place in a university degree program. Mature-age students who enter university via enabling programs are often amongst the most

disadvantaged, with many having had little positive experience of study behind them and a sizable proportion coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and little, if any, family history of higher education (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey 2004, Cantwell *et al.* 2001).

The Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle is one such enabling program and has the following features. It is for persons aged 21 and over; successful completion of the program can qualify students for University entrance, based on their results; students must take a total of four courses (subjects) which can be studied full-time over one semester or part-time over two semesters. There are no fees and it is open to all who wish to apply (Cantwell *et al.* 2001, Cullity 2006). Approximately 66% of Open Foundation students are female and it has a very high success rate. Over 90% of those who completed the program in 2006 were offered a university place for 2007 (University of Newcastle 2007).

Due to the fact that it has no fees and specifically targets mature-age students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the Open Foundation Program is regarded as an important equity program for the University of Newcastle (Cantwell *et al.* 2001). Cullity (2006) talks about enabling programs offering mature-age students a ‘second chance’ at education. The experiences of the group of students interviewed for this research indicates that, for many, it is more of a ‘first-chance’ – or, indeed, the first real opportunity they have had to consider undertaking higher education.

### **Who are the research participants?**

A brief summary of the 20 women and men, all of whom are in at least their second year of undergraduate study, is as follows:

- 15 female and 5 male
- 11 full-time and 9 part-time

- Age 32–52, median age of 40
- 9 married and living with a partner
- 19 have children, 26 years to 7 months
- 11 single parents
- None have parents who attended university
- 17 are the first in their family (of origin) to attend university.

It was not a criterion of the research for participants to be ‘first-generation’ university students, but given that nearly all of them came through the Open Foundation Program, coupled with the strong equity focus of that program, perhaps it is not surprising. Cullity (2006) tells us that ‘a closer portrayal of AEP students comprises adults who come from a low socio-economic background, left school prior to completing Year 12, are the first-in-the-family to study and are either in paid employment or recipients of social security benefits’ (p. 178). Cantwell *et al.* (2001) also demonstrate that the Open Foundation Program does indeed function as an effective equity program, providing opportunities for students who come from a background where university study is not the norm.

While the analysis of the interview data for this research is still at a very early stage, a number of themes have begun to emerge, tentatively classified as:

- Beginnings
- Challenges
- Resilience
- Identity
- Future

### **Beginnings**

Why did they come?

Why did these students decide to come to university? And why at this point in time? For the majority of the students, there was some

catalyst for action – some event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study. Other researchers have had similar findings. O’Shea (2007) mentions ‘some sort of recent catalyst’ (p.42) that often precipitated the decision to study. McGivney (2006) describes the path back into study for adult learners as being ‘often serendipitous’ (p.85). Her research in this area highlights a number of factors that are influential in adults returning to formal study, including reasons such as ‘because others in their circle are doing it’ and ‘because of the need to deal with an immediate situation in their life (life transitions, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce)’ (p.85). These kinds of serendipitous factors were certainly present also for many of the participants in this study:

My son started kindergarten and I thought I could either go and get another boring office job, or I could do something that I actually want to do ... (Fiona, 35)

It was all around the same time I lost my job, split up with him and thought ‘Okay!’ (Anne, 36)

I got a redundancy from the bank and I was thinking, what was I going to do with myself? (Evan, 44)

For some of the participants, it was a long-term dream that they had not been able to fulfil in the past:

I was a bit peeved that I didn’t put enough effort into going to Uni, and so it was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to go to Uni and do a degree. (David, 52)

It was never a question of if I would, it was when I would. (Helen, 33)

I always wanted... to go and study... and I wasn’t encouraged to do that... It has always been a yearning. (Mandy, 38)

I think I always knew I had the potential but it was only a thought for a long time. (Penny, 32)

For others, it was something quite unexpected:

Never in my wildest dreams ... I knew I was capable of something, but uni was just over my head ... I just thought it was all beyond me. (Carol, 44)

I saw one of the guys from school and he asked what I was up to and I told him I was at uni... he said, 'Oh bullshit!' He didn't believe me. I never thought about uni. Never actually thought outside of where I was ... (Virginia, 36)

It was just through talking to people that made me aware ... I'd probably be doing TAFE. I think I needed to do something, but it wouldn't have been necessarily uni, because I wouldn't have thought I was good enough. (Linda, 40)

So why now? And why not before? Chapman *et al.* (2006), in their research in Australian rural communities, identify the following barriers that impede participation in education for adults: personal and societal barriers; financial barriers; geographic barriers; management barriers; and vision, mission and identity barriers. For the respondents in this study, the major factors for all the respondents that appeared to have stood in the way of furthering their education could perhaps be classified as personal and societal barriers as well as vision, mission and identity barriers.

Specifically, what was identified by a number of the women was the lack of encouragement from family as well as a sense of not being 'smart enough'. This echoes the findings of a study conducted in the 1970s by McLaren (1985), with 48 female mature-age students enrolled at a small adult education college in the United Kingdom. McLaren found that most of the women had left school by 16 as a result of parental and societal attitudes about education not being important for girls: 'Most parents expected their daughters to marry young and to find a conventional job' (p.46).

Thirty years later, the women in this study described similar experiences.

My family life, as it was, was, like, get out and get a job. (Tina, 38)

I left school in 4<sup>th</sup> form. It wasn't even the thing to do the HSC back then – maybe just go out and do a trade – get a job. (Carol, 44)

Well, my mother didn't encourage me to get my HSC, in fact, she told me I wasn't smart enough, so I joined the workforce when I was sixteen. (Mandy, 38)

I had been told for so long that I wasn't very bright... (Helen, 33)

For some of the respondents, it was a case of unhappy memories of school which had inhibited them from considering further study. Golding, from his research with male adult learners (2006), believes that 'it is men who have had the least positive formal learning experiences – particularly at school – who are most at risk and are less likely to ... embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning' (p.176). However, Tett (2000) in her study of male and female mature-age working-class students at a small university in Scotland, found that 'all of the students were negative about their own school experiences' (p.186). She found interesting differences between the male and female descriptions of their school experiences. The men in her study tended to attribute their negative experiences to the teachers' dislike of them for being too rebellious or argumentative, while the women were more likely to attribute their negative experiences of school to pressure at home, through family responsibilities and expectations.

Whatever the specific reasons, both the men and women in this study commonly reported negative school experiences:

I didn't like school ... I moved around a lot of the time so I didn't really develop any close relationships. (Anne, 36)

No good. I didn't like it. I also have no HSC. I had bad school experiences. (Katrina, 42)

End of Year 9, things just went downhill from there ... I went on to Year 11, dropped out half-way through ... I just lost it with school. (Bob, 41)

For others, it appeared to be a case of life simply getting in the way:

I had wanted to be a teacher when I left high school, but my father had died between Year 10 and Year 11 and Mum said, 'I can't afford to buy your Year 11 uniform, do you mind getting a job?', so that was the end of that. (Nerida, 49)

I started my HSC, but I fell pregnant so ... I started doing it by correspondence... but I couldn't concentrate. (Anne, 36)

I had to drop out [of uni]... I had a 3 month old child and I couldn't do it ... (Helen, 33)

#### Inspirations and influences

'People who act as influencers, catalysts or change agents are hugely important in leading others into learning' (McGivney 2006, p.87).

This appeared to hold true for many of the participants in this study. Sources of influence and inspiration included parents, friends, partners and teachers:

I found a Wyong TAFE course called CEW [Career Education for Women] and they were fantastic ... she [the teacher] said, 'If you want to go to uni, you should do it, because you can.' (Carol, 44)

So I spoke to my wife ... she said go and get educated... she found out all the information and I made it by three days ... my wife pushed me. (Bob, 41)

I have a friend who was doing uni at the time. Different degree ... but I saw her doing it with her family and I thought, well, maybe I could do it too. (Tina, 38)

For one of the women, her son was the catalyst, although not in the way one might have expected: 'I was trying to arrange to get him [my son] into uni and he wasn't interested and I thought, "Well, bugger you! If you're not interested, I'll go to uni".' (Nerida, 49)

For many, recent experiences of formal learning had been much more positive than their school experiences. Some like Carol, quoted above, were inspired by a recent experience of other formal study to think about going on to university:

I started off doing the CEW course and, right from that course, I wanted to go to university. (Anne, 36)

I loved it! [TAFE Diploma] It was a real culture change ... and ever since then, I sort of had a yearning, looking for something ... (Mandy, 38)

I'd enjoyed learning massage ... and I guess I finished that and thought, 'Well, I want to do more and I want to keep learning now...'. (Rachel, 47)

These findings are again similar to those of Tett (2000) who found that all in her study were 'able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives' (p.187).

#### Coming to University – what made it all possible?

Coming to university was only made possible by alternative entry programs – and, in the case of 18 of the 20 participants, it was specifically the University of Newcastle's Open Foundation Program. Once again, there was for many a serendipitous element to their introduction to the idea of doing Open Foundation.

For Grace, there was a sense of hearing about it just in time:

I opened up the local paper and it had the Open Foundation ... and it was closing day on the Friday so ... I went straight down and that was it. My husband came home and said, 'What did you do today?', and I said I went and enrolled in uni! (Grace, 47)

For Fiona, there was a chance encounter: 'I saw this lady that I used to live next door to... on the campus on that Open Day and she said you have to do Open Foundation. It's the best thing in the world.' (Fiona, 35)

For Linda, who was working at the coffee shop on campus and heard about Open Foundation from some of her regular customers, there was a sense of being in the right place at the right time: 'And then finding out about Open Foundation ... I'm thinking, how did these oldies get to be uni students?' (Linda, 40)

An anxious time...

Their memories of starting University were mixed. For many it was an anxious time – particularly for a number of the women:

First six weeks were a nightmare ... very overwhelming ... I was close to just giving it all away ... (Katrina, 42)

It was scary ... I really felt out of my depth. (Ingrid, 48)

I'd sit in the car for 45 minutes ... I couldn't get out of the car ... I was brand new and it was frightening. (Amber, 49)

Similarly, O'Shea (2007), in her research with first-in-the-family female students, found that 'for many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt' (p.41). However, for some, the excitement outweighed the fears: 'The first day I walked in and feeling just excited, oh all this knowledge ... it felt good!' (Grace, 47, married)

The men's memories of starting indicated that they had felt reasonably confident and any worries were more about financial concerns:

There were no real difficulties ... I really, really enjoyed it. (John)

There was no real fear. I guess the only apprehension was, can I afford to come? (David)

The biggest one was giving up work and not having an income. (Bob)

Much of the previous research into the mature-age student experience indicates that women generally tend to be less confident than men in the academic environment. Acker's research with mature-age students in the UK (1994) found that male students tended to 'show few self-doubts and high self-confidence' (p.66). This is supported by Shands' research (1998) which found that female students tended to 'distrust their intellectual capacity more often than men' (p.145).

### Challenges

The major difficulties and challenges described by the participants can be classified as: financial struggles; lack of time; difficulties with organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; and balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children. Abbott-Chapman and colleagues, in their research with mature-age students at the University of Tasmania, found that 'mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies, and also financial problems associated with giving up full-time employment' (Abbott-Chapman *et al.* 2004, p.171).

Similarly, for all the students interviewed for this study, life was a juggling act. Finding enough time and enough money were constant challenges for most:

Financial adjustment is a big one ... but when it comes to the kids, trying to find time for the kids and the family. They don't always come number one which is really wrong. (Bob, married, 4 children)

I think the toughest thing overall is just the financial situation, because I've only been able to work part-time, and wanting to

be a good mum and have time for the girls. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

I've been having to budget very tightly ... I think they [the children] are probably just sick of budgeting for so many years. (Penny, single, 2 children)

Because my daughter turned 16, the money I was getting from Centrelink almost halved ... (Virginia, single, 1 child)

For some of the women who were living with a partner, their growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions led to a change in the dynamics of their relationship:

I get a little bit frustrated with him sometimes because he still thinks the same ... so we just try to cool off on the political debates. (Linda, married)

I probably don't have as much respect for him as I once had, because now I know I'm more confident and say what I think. (Mandy, married)

The pressure on some relationships when women in particular return to study has been well-documented in previous research. Many men can feel 'threatened and excluded' (Wilson 1997, p.358) resulting in an 'almost total lack of domestic and emotional support' (Edwards 1993, p.117). Leonard (1994) also describes how a third of the female mature-age students she interviewed met considerable resistance from their male partners over their decision to return to study.

Two women in this study had encountered considerable resistance from their partners, to the point where they had chosen to end the relationship:

He wasn't too happy with it; he made things difficult for me and I had to borrow the neighbour's car just to get here ... you know, I was the wife at home, dinner on the table, house was always clean – the house is never clean now! It got to the point where he

would be drunk on the days that I was at uni ... it got beyond a joke. (Helen, now divorced, 2 children)

His opinion was it was time for me to sit back and knit and wait to become a grandmother ... (Amber 49, now divorced, 2 children)

One of the men had also separated, due to long-term issues combined with his finding a more compatible partner at university: 'It probably would have happened anyway [marriage break-up]. I think the big thing was I met somebody that I clicked with.' (Evan, now separated, 3 children)

In contrast, some of the participants found that their studies had affected their relationship in positive ways. 'While families can provide strain, they also ... provide support' (Wilson 1997, p.358). Anne, Bob and Nerida are examples of this:

I think it's helped support it [relationship with partner] because we are both studying (Anne)

Probably affected for the better. My wife is very supportive, always has been. (Bob)

I appreciate what my husband does for me, and I don't know if I used to do that. (Nerida)

However, for all of the participants in this study, life was a constant juggling act – some juggling a combination of the demands of study and paid work:

I didn't give up my work, I still have a mortgage and I'm still working ... generally 35 hours a week minimum on top of studies. (John, married, one child, studying full-time)

When I get home from work ... I have something to eat and then I'm straight into the study. (Paul, divorced, 3 children, studying part-time)

The women in particular were juggling the demands of study, housework, children, partners – and, at times, also paid work:

I started this new job a couple of weeks ago. It started on a Monday, so I had an assignment due on that Monday which I'd already got an extension for, and so I just had to stay up until I finished – up to 3am so I finished it, and that's becoming the norm. (Tina, married, 3 children, studying part-time)

I had to let go of the housework – what a shame! Now we crunch around on rice bubbles and food ... I'm finding it quite frustrating – the mess. (Mandy, married, 5 children, part-time study)

The juggling of life beyond uni was huge at times ... it all came down to me. I was the one running the house, so I had to make sure all their needs were met and the house was looked after. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

Feminist literature refers to the multiplicity of women's roles and the 'gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (Wolf-Wendel & Ward 2003, p.113). Other research into the mature-age student experience finds that 'often a return to school creates significant role strain and feelings of guilt, inadequacy and self-blame over difficulties in handling multiple roles' (Rice 1989, p.552).

Quotes such as the ones below demonstrate this sense of role strain, guilt and self-blame which was evident in the stories of many of the women in this study:

I found it very difficult last night, she was in tears [7 year old daughter] ... and I put my time away to finish my essay, so inside I wanted to get things done ... It's a big conflict because we had a lecture and a presentation this morning ... (Katrina, widowed, 2 children)

Just I do feel like a bit of a failure from having to push the kids aside a lot ... at the moment, my son is going through some issues at school ... and you have feelings, is that because of me? is it all my fault? ... (Tina, married, 3 children)

Other feminist writers perceive that society places a different value on 'men's time' and 'women's time', with men's time being seen as more valuable and productive (McNay 2000). Hughes (2002) talks about 'male time and female time' (p.133) with 'male time' being linear, clock time and 'female time' as time given up to the demands and needs of others. Certainly amongst the participants in this study, it appeared to be the case that, in general, study time for the men was very much 'taken for granted' with wives and partners tailoring their activities around male study time. In contrast, the women tailored their study time around other responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities.

For example, Bob's wife – now the family breadwinner since Bob gave up work to study full-time – tailors her work around his study hours: 'Any work my wife is doing, she has tailored it around my hours' (Bob, married, 4 children, full-time study).

On the other hand, comments from Grace, Anne and Rachel indicate the ways in which they ensure that their study hours do not impinge on family time:

I finish everything by 4pm, I pick my husband up at 4.30 and after that it's dinner time. (Grace, married, 3 children, part-time study)

I always make sure I've got weekends free. (Anne, living with partner, 2 children, full-time study)

I had to make sure that my classes fitted in with what the girls were doing. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

## Resilience – what helps them to keep going?

### Help and support

Students reported receiving help and support from a number of sources – particularly lecturers, support services on campus (such as counselling, learning support, careers advisers, student mentors), partners, children and their own parents.

My Mum lives two streets away, so does my sister so I get a lot of help from them. (Penny)

The lecturers are more approachable, they have more time for you. (Virginia)

I found her [lecturer] very, very supportive ... when I hit that point and said, 'I can't do this', then ... I spoke to student support. (Katrina)

The student support here ... has been great. (David)

However, above all, the students talked about the support, friendship and assistance they received from fellow students:

The girls I'm with – our little study group that we made in Open Foundation – I made some friends there and we're all doing the same degree and we formed a little group and we support each other ... (Linda)

My friends here at uni are just amazing ... I've met some real friends here, friends that I will have for the rest of my life. (Helen)

First off, my friends. If we don't understand something, we talk among ourselves. (Fiona)

She [friend at uni] and I stumbled through both of our fall-overs and if one of us is down we talk about it to each other. (Amber)

It was not only the women who reported this. The men regarded their network of fellow students on campus as just as important:

You have to form your little 'cliques' because it's vital ... and it's reciprocal, too. We had this group of 10 [in a class exercise] and this core of ten people are really my best friends at uni now. (Evan)

Probably first of all, fellow students – we talk. (David)

Probably more [help] from students. (John)

### Determination to achieve the goal

Sheer determination was a significant factor for many in their persistence with their studies, despite the obstacles previously discussed.

I think the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn and I don't want to give in half-way and I want to see it to the end. (Paul)

I don't like to give up – definitely not! (Fiona)

Probably if I wasn't so pig-headed, determined, I might have given up. (Grace)

I didn't want to give up ... I don't think I've ever given up on anything in my life. (John)

It would be a waste of all that time I have already invested ... that's what keeps me going. (Tina)

### Love of learning

A genuine love of and desire to continue learning was another factor expressed by a number of the students:

I love it ... I get a buzz ... just the environment, the books and the knowledge. (Ingrid)

I enjoy it ... I like to write, but it doesn't always come easy, but I'm happy when I finish what I do. (Carol)

My love of learning. (Nerida)

The knowledge that will come out of it ... the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn. (Paul)

#### A growth in independence

A number of the women in particular cited a new independence in their lives that increased their determination to continue with their studies.

The fact that the first time in 15 years I can just get in the car and drive up and get lost in books and research ... independence. And it's something of mine. I don't have to share it with [husband] and the children, they don't have to be here, they don't have to have anything to do with it. (Mandy)

The thought that when I go overseas I can get work ... and I'm not going to be on the dole ... and have my own home. (Virginia)

Feminist literature on women and leisure (Wearing 1996 & 1998, Wimbush & Talbot 1988) discusses the notion of leisure as a form of 'resistance' for women against the traditional female role of wife, mother, housewife and a means of achieving some level of independence from the restrictions of these roles. Wearing points out that 'the freedoms provided by the sphere of leisure can result in a greater autonomy for women' (Wearing 1998, p.49). While it is highly debatable whether university study can be called a 'leisure' activity, it was certainly the case that, like leisure, study had provided some of these women with time to themselves. For a number of the female participants in this study, going to university appeared to have provided them with a means of 'resistance' which enabled them to develop some legitimate independence from the confines of the traditional female role.

#### Identity

All the participants in this study reported some changes in their view of themselves since undertaking university studies. Many also

reported changes in others' perceptions of them. Generally speaking, the women seemed more often to report changes that appeared to be significant internal transformations, such as:

Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void. (Grace)

Coming to uni, I sort of bloomed ... Much more outgoing. (Fiona)

I've gained confidence ... I feel happier – I guess self-esteem. I feel like I'm going somewhere. I'm achieving a goal. (Penny)

I feel like I'm an intelligent, attractive woman that is capable and confident and can hold an intelligent conversation. (Mandy)

My thoughts about myself have changed. I understand myself better. (Linda)

I'm a different person totally. (Nerida)

While the men also reported changes that appeared to reflect significant personal growth, this was more often couched in terms that reflected an addition to existing skills and a growth in status or respect from others:

I don't think I have a higher or lower opinion of myself, but I knew I was a skilled boat builder – this has just added to my skills. (John)

I see myself as more confident ... I've always been socially aware, but I think probably more so now. (David)

I have grown as a person ... I'm a lot more tolerant ... I feel like I have got a bit more respect. (Bob)

Confidence ... My people skills have always been good, but just to be able to practise has been good. (Evan)

I think I just know a bit more ... I'm a bit more 'full of it!' (Paul)

McClaren's study (1985) of mature-age female students found that higher education was 'a significant instrument of change' (p.171) in

the lives of the women she interviewed. This has been supported by a number of other studies of women as mature-age students (Edwards 1993, Kelly 1987, Martin 1988). Studies of both female and male mature-age students (Britton & Baxter 1999, Tett 2000, West, Hore, Eaton, & Kermond 1986) also indicate that while there are significant changes in identity for both men and women in higher education, the change in identity for women is particularly profound. Britton and Baxter (1999) for example, tell us that ‘men and women tell different stories, which reflect not only differences in their life experiences but also different understandings of the self’ (p.192).

When asked about any losses they had experienced as a result of being a student, virtually all the participants, female and male alike, mentioned time and money as being the most significant losses. Interestingly though, for all the struggles, each one seemed to agree that the gains outweighed the losses:

Because the alternative is to go and work at Coles, and I really don’t want to go back there. (Anne)

Only time and money. I don’t see many downsides. I have people say, ‘I’d love to do what you’re doing’ and I say ‘Do it!’ I don’t think there are many losses. (Bob)

That’s the wonderful thing about uni, that it opens you to this world that never ends. (Penny)

## Future

The male participants were all very certain of their future:

I will have a nice comfortable life coming up. (Bob – Teaching)

Get a position or to gain employment with a job that will be stimulating. (David – Management)

I shouldn’t have any problem getting a job ... I don’t see any shortage of jobs for me when I finish. (Evan – Teaching)

Get a job with fair wages and security and super ... really capitalise ... (John – Science)

The qualification will make me more marketable. (Paul – Management)

For some of the women, their future was still to be determined:

I’m not sure where I’m going to end up ... I have no idea. (Carol – Arts)

I’m still kind of unsure where I want to go. (Fiona – Social Science)

I haven’t got a firm plan ... I don’t know how to narrow it down or what job I can do. (Penny – Teaching)

This is consistent with other studies of mature-age students such as Tett’s research (2000) with ‘working class’ students in the United Kingdom. She found that ‘the difference having a degree would make was ... gendered’ in that ambitions were ‘much more instrumental for the men whilst the females had less specific ambitions’ (p.189).

However, in this study this was not the case for all of the women:

I would like to be a registered psychologist and so that’s what I’m aiming for – and get an internship somewhere and register. (Grace – Psychology)

Hopefully, I’m able to secure a job which will pay more and therefore economically be able to support my children better than I would have been able to originally. (Katrina – Teaching)

Also, even though some of the women did not articulate the specifics of their future, there was a strong sense for many of knowing what they wanted in a broader sense:

Self-sufficiency and independence for me. I don’t want to have to rely on any government department or any other person

for financial support. I want to be able to do it myself. (Helen – Herbal Therapy)

I'll have more money, and I won't have Centrelink breathing down my neck. (Ingrid – Teaching)

Perhaps it is not surprising that there was this recurring theme of the hope and desire for an independent future, given the relative lack of prior opportunities for independence in the lives of many of the women. Edwards (1993) in her study of mature women students showed that the juggling of demands between home and family impacted heavily on women and placed significant barriers in the way of their being able to find and enjoy either personal or financial independence.

Also emerging strongly through the stories of both the women and the men in this study was a sense that, through the completion of their studies, personal dreams would be realised:

I will be up on the podium with my friends in 2008 ... we've got dreams and plans ... (Bob)

Sense of purpose, learnt something and can use it to help other people. (Anne)

I can't wait for the day when I can wear the funny hat and have a degree, and I guess there is a certain amount of prestige about it. (Paul)

There's about a hundred doors [opening up] ... totally different. (Amber)

Just experience something different. Africa ... something entirely different out of Australia. Aid worker or something. (Tina)

The changes that they envisaged for the future were not limited only to themselves. All of them viewed a different future, to varying degrees, for those close to them, particularly their children:

The kids are definitely taking their studies more seriously. I was really surprised by that – just by seeing me do it ... (Ingrid)

I've now started a new cycle and my children can start too ... the girls have been exposed to all of that and they will continue it now ... it's like breaking a vicious cycle. (Rachel)

I'll be able to provide a better life for my children and better education. (John)

They will see that there are opportunities ... whereas, maybe if we hadn't thought about going to uni, they probably wouldn't have thought about it. (Penny)

For these mature-age students, not only has university been 'a significant instrument of change in their lives' (McLaren 1985, p.171) but it seems likely that it has, in many cases, been an agent of generational change. The children of these now university-educated men and women may indeed be more likely to consider continuing into higher education than they might have otherwise, through the positive example of their parents' achievements.

## Conclusion

Research into participation levels in higher education in Australia tells us that 'socially and educationally disadvantaged mature learners remain some of the most under-represented students in the higher education community' (Abbot-Chapman *et al.* 2004 in Cullity 2006, p.184). We also know that 'the success of mature-aged non-traditional entry appears independent of socio-economic background' (Cantwell *et al.* 2001). It is therefore of enormous importance that opportunities are created to enable such students to enter university and to succeed. Alternative entry programs and in particular equity-based enabling programs such as the Open Foundation program create such opportunities.

The stories of these 20 women and men, who have come to university as 'second chance' students (Cantwell *et al.* 2001) illustrate the

transformative nature of their experiences as students. The growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of dreams and ambitions being achieved, were common to all of these students. In addition, the possibility for generational change in terms of likelihood of participation in higher education appears very strong.

Public institutions have a vital role to play in developing greater awareness of ‘the relevance of lifelong learning to student personal and/or vocational well-being’ (Cullity 2006, p.185) as well as putting into practice programs which provide opportunity and encouragement for ‘non-traditional’ students to enter university. Research into mature learners also ‘indicates the need to consider mature students as individuals with separate social, educational, personal and vocational experiences’ (Cullity 2006, p.189). Hence it is of equal importance that institutions provide specific programs and ongoing support to enable such students not merely to enter university, but to find the encouragement to help them stay and succeed.

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## Workplace learning: depression as an 'undiscussable' topic in eight information and communications technology organisations in South Australia

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*More than 800,000 Australians every year are affected by depression. Despite evidence that depression is manageable, that people can be successfully treated in individually appropriate ways and that earlier identification and treatment are associated with more rapid recovery, depression appears to be poorly recognised and understood. In this paper, I focus on depression in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resource managers in eight organisations within the deregulated information and computing technology sector in South Australia. I focus on managers' ability to access information about depression, and their beliefs about the value of work-based education about the illness. I also report on managers' understandings of prevailing attitudes towards depression and mental health education in their workplaces. The analysis is conducted within a qualitative, interpretive framework.*

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### **Introduction: the impact of depression on the Australian workforce**

There is an increasing recognition of the impact of depression on Australians (Andrews 2001, Hickie 2002). According to Hickie (2001), it affects over 800,000 Australians every year and over six million working days are lost annually due to people experiencing episodes of depression. Current data indicate that depression is certainly manageable, that people can be treated in individually appropriate ways with great success and that earlier identification and treatment are associated with more rapid recovery (Australian Health Ministers 1998, Hosman & Jane-Llopis 1999, Kline & Sussman 2000, Parker 2003, 2004, Australian Health Ministers 2003).

Nevertheless, depression appears to be poorly understood by many Australians (Jorm & Parslow 2002, *beyondblue* 2007). Moreover, people with depression are often marginalised in workplaces, being regarded as non-productive and an expensive burden on business (Jorm & Parslow 2002). Haslam, Brown, Hastings and Haslam (2003) found that many people were secretive about having depression as they were fearful of being stigmatised. While it is reported that various state and federal programs are beginning to increase public awareness of the impact of depression (Hickie 2004, Jorm & Parslow 2002), *beyond blue: the national depression initiative* (beyondblue 2007) highlights the results of multiple surveys and formal research, which in summary indicate that:

- there is a stigma attached to depression by both employees and employers
- there is a general lack of awareness of depression as an illness
- there is discrimination in the workplace against employees with depression
- people are unlikely to reveal that they are depressed for fear of the consequences.

According to Jorm (2000), Byrne (2000), Gabriel and Liimatainen (2000) and Bolton (2003), the apparent stigma attached to depression in the workplace and associated fear of disclosure can be challenged by using a range of approaches including workplace-based mental health education. When discussing the urgent need for the promotion of mental health in order to protect, support and sustain the emotional and social well-being of the Australian population, The National Mental Health Plan (Australian Health Ministers 2003) stated that:

The media have a role to play in community education regarding mental health ... settings such as schools, workplaces, primary care and community organisations are particularly suitable for such education. (p.17)

From an economic perspective, education could assist with productivity and, from a social justice perspective, it could lead to a reduction in discriminatory workplace activities. Moreover, given that early detection and treatment leads to earlier recovery, information about how to recognise depression, and when and how to seek individually appropriate support and treatment, would assist employees who may be depressed.

### **The research**

Against this background, I undertook a series of interviews during 2004 focusing on the deregulated information and communication technology (ICT) sector in South Australia. My own education and employment experiences had fostered my belief in the value of assisting employees and providing workplaces free of discrimination in which employee well-being was considered a desirable goal. However, my observations and experiences while working within the ICT sector regularly challenged this belief.

I therefore undertook research in ICT workplaces in order to develop an understanding of managerial perceptions of depression in the

private ICT sector and what access managers had to information which could assist them. My focus was on organisational awareness of depression in employees and perceptions of the appropriate care of depressed employees. As I explained to the participants, the aim of the research was not to investigate the causes of depression or to explore its rate of occurrence in their workplaces. Irrespective of causal factors, I wanted to conceptualise what managers *understood* about supervising employees with depression. I also sought insight into organisational attitudes both towards workers with depression and towards assisting them in their daily workplace interactions. From this information, I hoped to gain some comprehension of managerial perceptions of depression and the origins of these perceptions. Ultimately, I aimed to be able to recommend appropriate approaches towards depression in order to ameliorate what I had observed anecdotally while employed in the ICT sector to be discriminatory and disenfranchising behaviour.

### **Methodology**

Because I sought to explore and understand individuals' perceptions and experiences, I chose a qualitative methodology, concluding that this would more richly and fully describe the phenomenon from the perspectives of both the participants and me as the researcher. Ideally, this dual perspective can contribute to the reader's own understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Hoepfl 1997). Stake (1978), Eisner (1991) and Pope and Mays (1995) propose that qualitative studies provide a 'voice', and that data emerging from the research provide insights into participants' experiences, perceptions of the world around them and of social constructions that they use to understand their world. One of the aims of qualitative research is to develop realisations about the social understanding and activities in participants' environs, highlighting the meanings attached to them by participants and illuminating the experiences and views of all participants (Pope & Mays 1995). As I was interested in investigating

tacit and/or overt social learning about the value of workplace education about depression, qualitative research methods provided me with a mechanism to explore and understand the participants' social, work-world (Morse 1991, Strauss & Corbin 1998). Walsham (1993: 4–5) describes such studies as understanding experiences through the meanings that people assign to them, 'aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context'.

### **Method**

My research involved undertaking interviews with managerial staff employed in the private sector of ICT in South Australia. The organisations canvassed were active in the fields of software development, engineering, hardware development and support, computer training and education, website development and ICT consulting. I sought the participation of people whose responsibilities included personnel or human resources management within these organisations. Of the twenty-four organisations approached, eight agreed to participate in the research. Table 1 provides details of these organisations and the interviewees.

*Table 1: Characteristics of participants and participating organisations*

<b>Title of interviewee</b>	<b>Number of employees</b>	<b>Location of head office</b>
Quality Manager/ Admin support person	20	Adelaide
Adelaide Office Manager	7 in Adelaide	Interstate
Managing Director	6	Adelaide
Practice Manager	30 in Adelaide	Adelaide with interstate offices
Director of Operations	24	Adelaide
Senior Human Resources Consultant	350 in Adelaide	International, HRM offshore
Managing Director	20	Adelaide
Human Resources Manager	270 in Adelaide	International, HRM for Adelaide office in Adelaide

In their survey of 1,435 small to medium Australian organisations across most industry sectors, Wiesner and McDonald (2001: 37) found that almost 70% of organisations did not have a designated human resources manager. In the context of the current research, similarly only the two large, internationally-based organisations employed a designated human resources manager or consultant. Of the small to medium enterprises, one individual had multiple roles of quality management, administration support and reception. In the other cases I interviewed the most senior person in the office. These people had all designated themselves as being responsible for human resources in their organisation.

This research is one component of a larger study in which managers were asked a total of thirty semi-structured questions. Although many significant themes emerged from the research, I focus on the following emergent themes for the purposes of this paper:

Managers' knowledge of and access to educational resources which could assist them while working with employees with depression

Managers' beliefs in relation to work-based education about depression

Managers' beliefs about their employees' understandings of and attitudes towards depression and work-based education about it.

In the following discussion, the term 'SME manager' refers to managers of small to medium sized enterprises.

### **Results: employee education**

None of the organisations had a depression or mental health awareness program in any form.

Regardless of the size of the organisation, managers appeared to support education related specifically to ICT, rather than education that, to them, seemed peripheral to the economic existence of the enterprise. The 'development' of the individual in ways that could be associated with anything other than immediate, technologically-allied skills did not initially appear to be a major concern to them. They cited priorities and lack of budget as highly problematical. One manager explained that: 'We are not dealing with grief etc. The training budget here barely covers project management.' Another SME manager explained that '[the organisation's name] isn't strong on training, lack of money really'.

Two managers referred unequivocally to the relevance of 'the bottom line' and variations of 'In this industry, the managers need to know that the training will add value' were consistent across several organisations.

The SME managers described their organisations as having neither the time nor the allied fiscal freedom to support education that was

not relevant to what they identified as their immediate business needs. Training related to depression was perceived as not clearly work-related, and thus not a high enough priority, and was assumed to be 'not of interest to engineers'.

This reticence about undertaking work-based, mental health education is characteristic of the low uptake of any forms of training activities by managers and employees in SME enterprises (Bartram 2005, Billett 2001). Dawe and Nguyen (2007: 12) cite 2001–2002 findings of the Australian Bureau of Statistics that, while small businesses employ approximately 3.6 million people in Australia, only one third of them provide any structured training for their employees. Gray (1994) and Greenbank (2000) describe managers in SMEs as reactive: they pursue training which they believe will assist them to deal with their perceived immediate business requirements or which they perceive emerging as a result of specific commercial demands, rather than as planned employee proficiency enhancement programs (Lange, Ottens & Taylor 2000, Matley 2000, Vinten 2000).

### **Organisational silence**

In relation to the topic of depression, the interviews revealed a general inclination towards organisational silence. One manager was initially eager to add information about depression to her organisation's intranet as soon as possible and stated that she was keen for me to refer her to websites about depression as soon I returned to the university. After more thought, however, she clarified that she would put the information under the topic of general health and well-being rather than under the heading 'depression', explaining that this would be 'more subtle'. Similar ideas about the 'private' nature of depression – and therefore necessarily discreet access to material about it – were reiterated by several other managers and emerged across the organisations. One SME manager summarised depression as being 'a hidden problem. Some people may not even let you know if they are on medication. It's a cultural taboo type area.'

The interviews provided insight into organisational cultures which encourage privacy and non-disclosure of personal issues and in which a rational, non-emotional approach to work can flourish. Depression was regarded both as a problem and as something that was not discussed in their workplaces.

Nevertheless, managers were willing to report on what they believed their employees thought about depression, giving information about employee perceptions readily and without query. It is possible that titles such as 'manager' or 'managing director' and so on had imbued the holders with a sense of having privileged voices; the managers' images of themselves emerged as ones in which they assumed that they had ready access to a deep understanding of their employees' thoughts and beliefs. Perhaps this reflected their personal sense of hegemony.

When asked to describe what they considered their employees' beliefs about depression to be, one manager explained that: 'In this industry, they wouldn't articulate it ... I think that engineers are less likely to reveal their emotional attitudes'.

The belief that employees do not want to reveal their emotions was echoed by other managers who stated that:

It varies between individuals; they probably don't talk about it. They are reasonably optimistic and chin up. There are really both extremes of harsh and gentle. They would get frustrated with some behaviours though, they are private, non-intrusive and introverted.

Men don't do a lot of talking about it, not like in the forces ... there they all rely on each other in life and death situations.

One of the things I like about Australian culture is the 'she'll be right mate, things work out' attitude; I think it's a socio-cultural thing. I don't think they think about depression much.

The admiration of the heroic worker who forges on, unfettered by thoughts about personal concerns or problems, is reminiscent of McGowan's (2003: 9) discussion of 'bolstering your workplace identity'. In this latter example, however, the manager was also endorsing what he perceived to be an Australian attitude of not dwelling on matters such as depression.

One manager explained that '[t]hey wouldn't articulate it [that they were depressed]; they are engineers you know'. Another stated that: '[t]here is a veneer in Adelaide, there is a lid on; it's polite and restrained, and people sweep depression under the rug'. Yet another respondent claimed that:

There is a lot of repartee, they all support each other. They know they can talk about what they feel about the company here. I'm happy with that, but there has to be a line ... it can be problem that gets like a disease, how far is it likely to go?

In response to the question, *What do you think contributes to these attitudes and beliefs about not discussing personal matters like depression?*, some managers appeared to choose their words very carefully, often hesitating before answering. In some cases this may reflect a deeper level of thoughtfulness given to a question that they had not previously considered. It may reflect levels of psychological introversion, that is, pausing and thinking through to form a full response before replying (Myers & McCaulley 1985, Kroeger & Theusen 1992, Thorne & Gough 1991). In their replies, several participants described most of their employees as being 'too private' or 'introverted' to delve into other people's problems or to discuss their own.

Much later in the interview process and in the context of some of their earlier replies, I asked, *How could you encourage employees to attend programs/training courses about depression in the workplace?* Responses included variations of the idea that, while employees might attend such education if they were given free beer

and pizza, most suggested that people would definitely prefer to attend something that was technical and therefore 'relevant to their jobs' – for example, 'if there was a firewall server course, there'd be a pile up at the door'.

The notion of their employees being reticent about attending workplace mental health education and therefore the need to disguise or soften the topic was described by four people in slightly different areas in their interviews. Each person expressed reservations about making the topic 'too obvious', one person suggesting that whatever education was made available needed to be in 'a subtle and unobtrusive way; if it's on the internet and available at all times, it defuses the mystique'. Information needed to be 'safe' for both the employer and the employee, because 'these people may be touchy, too, if they are depressed'.

## Discussion

Although the word 'silence' was not used by anyone interviewed, the belief that depression was not something talked about in the workplace was consistent across organisations. A culture of silence is inherent in managers' descriptions of employee introversion, a preference for non-disclosure of personal problems, their predicted lack of voluntary attendance at work-based education about depression and general managerial disquiet and lack of knowledge about depression. Silence was not regarded as problematic by any of the participants, with the exception of one manager who advocated 'open door' policies to enhance employee morale, but who described such policies as problematic given that 'we are talking engineers here'. In every interview, the managers endorsed their quiet, rational workplaces. A tacit notion of the undesirability of 'emotions in the workplace' emerged. The people in these organisations appeared to sanction what they perceived as the quiet nature of their employees. They did not want to upset the *status quo* by delving into employees'

personal lives and, furthermore, stated a preference for their staff to have only private, personal access to information about depression.

Currently, management education about emotions in the workplace is proliferating in Australia, and in many cases emotion is presented as a negative facet of human life. For example, websites designed to teach people how to manage workplace emotions focus on anger, stress and irritability, all of which are generally associated with bullying. Emotions that can enhance the workplace such as joy, happiness and job satisfaction are not included in discussions of emotion found in management training brochures and marketing websites. These are exemplified by one Australian organisation which offers a course in *Managing emotion in the workplace*, the description of which is as follows:

This workshop focuses on understanding anger and aggression and possible causes of this challenging behaviour in the workplace. Organisational and individual strategies to minimise and manage customer aggression and ways to support staff will be addressed. (Zip Training Consultants 2008)

Further to this, the Australian Government initiative website, *Job Access*, notes under the heading 'Displaying appropriate emotions at work' that:

It is important for all of us to manage or control our feelings and emotions at work. Regular outbursts of anger, sadness, excessive worry or panic can lead to an inability to focus on the task at hand, impact negatively on co-worker morale, affect team work and compromise both safety and productivity. Inappropriate positive emotions such as over-exuberance or over-excitement can also result in difficulties interacting with others at work. (Job Access 2008)

With the exception of workplace training and education that deals with 'emotional intelligence', emotions emerge by default as synonymous with the negative end of the spectrum. It would

seem that emotions are tacitly considered to be undesirable in some workplaces. This reflects Goffman's (1959, 1973) concept of the necessity for people to undertake 'impression management' in organisations. It is also related to Hochschild's (1979, 1983) description of the need to manage one's emotions, either by inducing or inhibiting them as the circumstance in the workplace requires.

While Boden (1994) proposed that it is through talking that people in organisations construct understandings about organisational policies and procedures and generally learn the way in which things are done in their particular workplaces, Ryan and Oestreich (1991) and Morrison and Milliken (2000) extended this line of thought. They described how silence (as opposed to voiced discourse expressed through talking, emails and so on) is a powerful method for avoiding or suppressing topics that can be of concern to organisations. Ryan and Oestreich (1991) coined the term 'undiscussables' to refer to matters that are not spoken about, such as grievances about managers, co-worker performance, conflicts and personal problems. In the enterprises that I researched, topics such as personal problems or depression emerged as these undiscussables.

Further to this, when referring to depression and to people who were depressed, depersonalising labels such as 'this sort of thing', 'these people', 'those people' and 'people like that' occurred across most of the interviews. The use of vague pronominalisation (McGowan 2003: 5) and of the passive voice resulted in depression being something other and something with no name.

Additional disclosures provided further insight into how the organisational cultures of privacy and non-disclosure of personal issues were expressed. There were three references to various forms of 'employment for fit', whereby managers chose employees who would perpetuate the prevailing cultural climate in which private, non-intrusive behaviours were promoted as the norm. Perhaps the most unambiguous endorsement of silencing was when one manager

explained that the organisation did not want to draw attention to the topic of depression, because everyone would think that depression was an acceptable reason to take time off work and would do so. This 'absolute silencing' (McGowan 2003: 8) of depression conveys notions about the importance of work productivity and reflects the belief of some managers that people are intrinsically lazy by nature (Morrison & Milliken 2000) or exploitative of their workplace's generosity.

In one large organisation, the human resources manager explained that the organisation provided the services of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist their employees. However, the human resources staff did not delve into the reasons why their employees sought assistance: 'HR just gets the invoices so it's very private ... if they need a lot of [therapeutic] work, they can do it after hours'.

When asked, *What steps would you undertake if someone in your workplace was suffering from depression?*, managers generally expressed a reluctance to get involved:

Oh, I think that I'd try and find out the problem, hmm, I'd include the other MD, he's better at talking about that sort of thing ... Maybe I'd advise them to go to their doctor.

I wouldn't like to dabble too much. With a family friend, I have personal interest, but general people in the office ... I would prefer that they got to see a psychologist ASAP.

I'd tell them to go their GP right away.

Straight to the EAP.

These responses reflect Kitchener and Jorm's (2004) findings that, prior to undertaking a Mental Health First Aid training course in government department workplaces, participants in their study were not confident in providing personal help to people with mental illnesses or depression.

When further asking, *Would you make any referrals for colleagues with depression?*, I also prompted in some instances with suggestions such as: *What other sources of information and places or referral do you know about?* or *What are your resources and networks?* The small business managers relied primarily on family or friends, some of whom were serendipitously employed in professions in which they had skills and knowledge they believed could be of assistance to them:

None yet, but we will know that we have had the comp[ensation] case.

I'd probably tell them to go and see their doctor or someone who they could talk to about it ... and I'd probably ask my sister-in-law, she's an HR consultant and we can seek her advice.

My wife is a GP. I'd tell them to see their GP.

My wife and Dad, and of course we have a corporate lawyer and an accountant.

This reliance on personal contacts echoes the finding of Still and Soutar (1996) who found that, in a study of 91 small and micro business operators in New Zealand, accountants and family members were described as the principal and most effective sources of support in all their business activities by assisting them with problem solving or by being available with general advice or assistance. In that research, the government agencies which provided support services for small business were used less and rated lower than personal contacts. Eight years later, similar results have emerged in the current study, suggesting that managers and owners of small businesses are still isolated from the networks that could support them. Van Laere and Heene (2003) assert that small business managers need to develop, maintain and extend relationships, thus ensuring that their social circles include people who could assist with matters such as social and psychological support, in order to reduce the risk of isolation at the very times that assistance of this nature is needed.

Further to this, Moyle's (1998) research supported the notion that managers should indeed be able to provide support to their employees. However, the obverse of this becomes problematic, as managers may not have reciprocal relationships with their employees and hence not have a relationship of upwards support from them (Lindorf 2001: 275). Instead, the managers in Lindorf's research reported that, although workplace relationships were available to them, it was their spouse or partner who provided them with 'care, consolation and acceptance' (p. 280) when dealing with work-related problems. Lindorf hypothesised that this self-silencing in the workplace was associated with a fear of disclosure about problems to colleagues because the managers themselves could then be perceived as lacking in competence for their roles. The useful support (as articulated by the managers in Lindorf's research) that did emerge was that provided by co-worker peers rather than by subordinates or superiors. For the lone managing director, chief executive or manager working in a small to medium enterprise, this would obviously be problematic.

While silence in organisations has been described by Whyte (1994) as the space used in reflection for inspiration, much literature interprets silence as a collective absence of voice that occurs as a result of 'widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous' (Morrison & Milliken 2000: 708). In this sense, silence is regarded as a cause for managerial concern in that it is indicative of employee dissatisfaction. Alternatively, a culture of silence and introversion may reflect employer sensitivity towards an employee's need for quiet space to indulge in critical reflection, during which time they could evaluate their work inwardly, without the external distractions of the workplace around them. This purposeful alienation demonstrates 'empowerment' (Driver 2003: 6) in that it allows the individual to perceive new realities and new perspectives without being confined or moderated by external critical appraisal. It would seem that this

would be a highly desirable facility in organisations engaged in intensively creative and mentally challenging tasks such as designing software prototypes for industry or defence projects. This kind of silence was described by one manager in this way:

We do a lot of research and development work and with that you don't really know if someone is productive or not; you just design and see if it works, and they might be suffering silently but it's hard to measure in R[esearch] and D[evelopment] ... They just work quietly ...

Another explained, '[t]hey are really doing creative things, amazing things and they worry quietly'. He later elucidated:

... And the way that I've designed this building, I want them to be in a place that is quiet, I want them to feel comfortable and they can be quiet, I want them to be in a place that creates.

While two comments suggest a caring if not paternalistic attitude towards employees, one manager was unambiguous in his explanation that he believed he had a moral mandate to look after his employees:

The job selects people who are more likely to be depressive. They think more, suffer more deeply and are more sensitive ... it's the pace that's demanded of them. Sometimes I feel like I have to be a Dad here, they are very easy to imagine slights, they get upset ... we do expect a lot creatively.

On being asked, *How do the engineers support each other?*, one manager responded:

In small teams, there might be some support, but as a whole, they have the 'let them get on with the job' approach, both managers and colleagues, hmm, ahh, umm, they don't get involved ...

I asked for clarification: *They don't intrude?* He smiled and said, '[t]hat's it, that's the word I wanted – they don't intrude, they are

non-intrusive'. There is an underlying tension between this manager's earlier endorsement of open communication, the need for engineers to learn people skills, and organisational duty of care, and his desire to maintain workplace ignorance about depression in case employees took time off work that would impact on productivity. These comments were interspersed with his own questions about the validity of claims of depression. This tension reflected Hennestad's (1990) description of 'double bind leadership', in which senior managers claim to encourage employees to speak about things that concern them, yet use tacit and/or informal tactics to silence any opinions that differ from their own.

While silencing such as this can have the effect of reinforcing existing hegemonic structures and organisational processes, and maintaining the *status quo* of prevailing power dynamics (McGowan 2003), silence has also been described variously as reflecting a strategy by which employees can attempt to influence the decisions of supervisors (Creed 2003). Employee silence in relation to personal matters and non-attendance of mental health education without incentives could be interpreted as 'refusing to reproduce the reality of the master-signifier' (Bohm & Bruin 2003: 263) by which means employees can expose the limits of the hegemonic manager.

Furthermore, the managers whom I interviewed did not appear to be concerned about their employees' lack of communication with them. Silence was seen as an inevitable state of affairs related to introversion, non-intrusiveness, or with the engineers' inherent personalities. This degree of employee reserve, however, is reminiscent of Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin's (2003) study in which they found that employees chose silence because they were concerned about being perceived as negative in the eyes of their employers. This concern was validated by one manager who suggested that employees in her organisation who were 'grieved' might be regarded as 'just high maintenance' by supervisors.

Noelle-Neumann (cited in Bowen & Blackmon 2003: 1393) describes 'a spiral of silence' in which individuals are increasingly less likely to speak up about an issue if it is not supported by others. Further to this, Bowen and Blackmon 2003: 1432) assert that people within minorities (citing gay and lesbian employees as typifying such individuals) are particularly at risk of self-silencing because they have learned that expressing social difference fully and frankly in the workplace is not tolerated. People with depression also share many of the descriptions of membership of a minority whose total personal identity cannot be fully expressed through fear of exclusion and stigmatisation.

Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) assert that employee silence is not the lack of voice, but rather, is more appropriately understood as a construct in itself. They propose that silence has three facets which are parallel to the types of 'voice' which are openly articulated in organisations, but the inherent danger in silence is the lack of obvious, external behavioural cues and lack of real, concrete data (words, emails and so on) which lead to employers being likely to make incorrect assumptions about what their employees are thinking or feeling in the workplace.

When asked about the education or information resources they would like to offer in their workplaces, six of the eight interviewees suggested unobtrusive or discreet measures such as workplace access to web pages of 'good quality' rather than some form of workplace-based group training sessions. While internet resources would appear appropriate for employees in the ICT industry who can be assumed to be computer literate and who are perceived to be characteristically 'private', it would also seem that these proposals reinforce the silencing that had emerged throughout many of the interviews. Although these managers were not overtly discouraging talk about depression, they were nevertheless passively tapping into the vein of silence.

Ignorance about both the existence of reliable information and how to access it emerged. This was demonstrated by participants' earlier responses and by their concept of what constituted desirable material, given that there was some already available to them via the internet at the time of the interviews in 2004. Despite the managers stating that they all used the web extensively, none were aware of the many websites relating to mental health issues and support for depression which were endorsed by state and federal bodies (for example, *beyondblue*, CRUFAD, bluepages, bluesnews, healthysa.sa.gov.au and depressionet). Further to this, no participants appeared aware of the benefits, either for individuals or for their organisations, of early detection of depression and treatment for employees who recognised that they were depressed.

### Concluding comments

Given that that silence is essentially ambiguous, managers may simply fail to understand the real causes for employee silence and instead interpret it either unconsciously or otherwise in a way which is most expedient for them (Dyne, Ang & Botero 2003). It would seem, therefore, that if the concept of work-based mental health education is to be successful, there are several matters to overcome.

Some managers are unaware of the data about depression and the intrinsic cost to businesses if their employees are depressed. Some managers are not trained in human resources and need increased information about access to currently available, inexpensive sources of information to utilise when assisting their employees who may be depressed. Importantly too, those managers need to have enough education to increase their level of comfort about undertaking such activities. External programs or those which are held in an individual organisation's own premises by expert providers may be very useful in overcoming stigma and ignorance about depression. Again, however, such educational programs would need to be inexpensive, flexible and

tailored to individual business needs to make them attractive to an industry sector in which the inherent dual costs of education and loss of revenue emerge as one of several factors in limiting their appeal.

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## The 'accidental activist': learning, embodiment and action

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*The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen renewed interest in activism, community development and social change globally (Kenny 2006). This paper outlines the educational significance of the learning practices of activists as they engage within and against the state. In an era of adult education which emphasises lifelong learning and learning in the workplace, this article explores the holistic practices of activists as they learn from one another in a social context or 'on the job'. Adult activists act with agency, their learning is purposive; it is resolute and they are there and act for a reason. This learning is not only cognitive but also embodied; it is learning often associated with the emotions of passion, anger, desire and a commitment to social change. Drawing on current research in Australia, attention is given to an important but at times forgotten epistemology of adult learning.*

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### Radical adult education

Learning through social action belongs to a discourse of 'emancipatory learning', 'social purpose education', 'critical pedagogy' and 'radical adult education'. As a body of knowledge it is also broadly referred to as 'popular education'. The term 'radical adult education' describes how people both individually and collectively learn through their engagement with community development activities or by their participation in social movements (Foley 1999, Horton & Freire 1990, Jesson & Newman 2004, Newman 1994, 2006). Jesson and Newman (2004) state "learning in the sense we use here means learning by people acting collectively to bring about radical and emancipatory social change" (Jesson & Newman 2004: 251). For the purpose of this article, the term radical adult education will be used to describe this way of learning.

Radical adult education is a tradition in the field of adult education which encompasses community development activity, activism and advocacy of social change (Foley 1999, Jesson & Newman 2004, Mayo 1999, Newman 2006). Branagan and Boughton (2003) argue that in Australia the study of learning in activism continues to be in its formative years and has only recently been recognised as 'real' adult education (p. 347). Activism is a process whereby individuals act to have an impact on significant social change. It generally requires some resistance toward state apparatus or state systems. Couch (2004) provides us with a broad definition of activism:

A role assumed by individuals or collective actors either to resist what they consider to be a political wrong or to bring about political change, through contained or transgressive tactics, excluding political violence. An activist may therefore be a member of a social movement, popular struggle, trade union, collective, network, NGO, or civic or religious organisation, a scholar or student, or an individual unaffiliated with any group. (p. 15)

Yet the pedagogy of activism has a long history in Australia, among which are the Marxist or workers' education groups of the twentieth century who came together to inform workers of their rights relating to employment and work (Boughton 2005). This was defined by the workers' education programs of the 'Marxist Schools' run by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). These workers' education groups brought together people from a variety of backgrounds to discuss workers rights and social justice issues. This formal yet underground pedagogy was based on nineteenth century Chartism influenced at the time by the International Communist Party (Boughton 2005). As Boughton (2005) argues, the tradition of worker education in the socialist and communist movements operated from the late nineteenth century until the post-war period of the twentieth century:

From the 1920s onwards, the major vehicles for this education movement were socialist and communist party schools. In Sydney, as in Melbourne and other centres all over Australia in the 1940s, the CPA opened an adult education centre, called the Marx school. For an annual fee, members and supporters enrolled to study historical materialism, scientific socialism, Marxism-Leninism – in a word, communism. (p. 101)

Similarly, the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s in Australia and internationally were influenced by radical and socialist feminism. They contributed to the history of radical adult education in Australia by bringing together women in the 'women's consciousness raising groups' (Burgmann 2003: 111). The purpose here was not only to educate and to raise women's awareness about their own personal circumstances regarding oppression, although it did achieve this. It placed women's personal experience in a political context and encouraged women to take action on issues which concerned them. This informal pedagogy, with no concrete curriculum apart from an experiential form of feminism, was social learning though not acknowledged as such.

Burgmann (2003) points out the significance of the learning that took place for the women:

Consciousness raising groups were an important part of the women's liberation movement. They were groups of about a dozen women who shared theory, ideas and feelings with each other, enabling women to comprehend the social and collective nature of their individual problems. (p. 111)

The learning in both the workers' education and women's consciousness groups was ground-breaking in a number of ways. Learners were invited to participate in learning that raised their own political and personal consciousness. Yet there was also agency involved in this type of learning. Learning was thus purposeful in that it invited participants to act to change the world. In essence, this learning involved both personal and societal transformation (Freire 1972a).

Similarly, the learning spaces of neighbourhood houses, now an integral part of the Adult and Community Education (ACE) system in Australia, provided an avenue for women through socialisation to learn from one another about the world around them. In a study on women's experiences of involvement in neighbourhood houses, a discussion between four working class women who participated in the house "revealed a common experience of expanded knowledge and growing self-confidence as a result of their participation in the house" (Foley 1999: 54). Foley (1999) argues much of the learning that occurs in the houses is incidental and informal:

But the whole experience of a participant in a house is an important process of learning for women. Much of this learning is informal and incidental, it is embedded in other activities, and is often not articulated as learning by neighbourhood house members. (p. 54)

In effect these groups, by bringing individuals together to learn, are early spaces and sites of activists' learning. They are only a few examples of the early pedagogies of activism.

### **The pedagogy of activism**

What do activists learn when they are engaged in radical adult education? Foley (1999) argues there are three dimensions to learning in struggle: an analysis of the political economy; the operation of micro-politics and ideology, and knowledge of discourses at play in society. Chase (2000) believes environmental activists acquire skills and knowledge in five areas: technical knowledge, political knowledge, personal growth, life skills, and knowledge of organisations. Whelan (2002), who analysed environmental activists' training needs, argues the pedagogy of activism is founded in adult learning principles and occurs through learning in social movements. This learning is often informal, as formal education amongst environmental activists is uncommon (p. 33). Jesson and Newman (2004: 261) describe three domains of activists' learning:

- instrumental learning – “will provide the skills and information to deal with practical matters, to use existing structures and systems such as government and legal processes, but the purpose is always to bring about change”;
- interpretive learning – “which has a focus on communication or understanding the human condition; the focus is on people, what they are and how they relate”; and
- critical learning – activists learn problem-solving skills, and through reflection new meaning is produced. “It helps us understand the psychological and cultural assumptions that constrain the way we see the world”.

Loughlin (1996), in contrast, argues there is a need for a holistic analysis of transformative learning. Too much attention, she

claims, is paid to cognitive ways of knowing. Her research amongst women, who had experienced emancipatory learning through their participation in women's consciousness raising groups, led her to conclude that learning came through informal processes that changed the individual's meaning perspectives. She argues there needs to be “an integration of rational and non-rational ways of knowing, which includes an analysis of values and value shifts that take place in the learner” (Loughlin 1996, p. 56).

Non-rational ways of knowing are explored in empirical research conducted by Kovan and Dirkx (2003), who interviewed environmental activists involved in small non-government organisations in the United States with regard to maintaining their commitment to activism and the role of learning in “maintaining their long-term commitment and passion” as activists (p. 103). The findings of their research are important because, while these activists noted the use of the intellect and systemic thinking as being important to their learning practices, there was also a spiritual dimension associated with their learning. Activists' knowing in this sense is deeply rooted in both the conscious and unconscious 'self' (Kovan & Dirkx 2003, p. 110). They view their involvement in activism as a 'calling'. Therefore, these activists' emancipation was entwined with a perception of a shift in the 'self'; there is a sense of fate, a sense of purpose to their learning. There is a strong sense of spirituality and emotional commitment that drives their activism. These activists believe that they are meant to be there.

### **Methodology**

This study has been developed in the process of doctoral research at Victoria University, with the primary methodology developed from a qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, Stage & Manning 2003). While the overriding methodology is qualitative (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005), data have been collected by conducting

semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Australian activists in order to develop a series of case studies (Stake 2003, 2006). Purposeful selection of participants has occurred (Merriam 1998). Two groups of activists have been chosen in order to compare the differences and similarities in learning for those activists deemed to be 'circumstantial activists'. For example, those activists who have come to activism because of a series of life circumstances, and in contrast, the learning of 'lifelong activists', those activists who have maintained a commitment to social and political activism over a long period of time.

Individuals have been selected from a wide range of social movements, community development and political activities. Selection has included consideration for difference and diversity in terms of gender, age, ability and ethnicity. The option of confidentiality has been given to each participant in the research; where confidentiality is chosen, participants are given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. The research has ethics clearance from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Using a case study approach, this article follows the stories of Terry Hicks, Hugo and Bahar to draw attention to the pedagogy of activism. Terry has given consent to use his actual name, Hugo and Bahar are both pseudonyms. At the time of writing, two-thirds of the data for the doctoral research had been collected. Data from the interviews have been chunked into themes using a matrix (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). This article considers three themes that are presently emerging from the research:

- adult activists develop skills on the job – their learning is mostly informal, and through the opportunity to practise and socialise with one another they become more expert at what they do,
- activists use both reason and reflection – not only do they learn to think critically about systems and structures in society, activists

are reflective practitioners, and they renew and re-make their practice through critical reflection; and

- activists' learning is an embodied and holistic practice – they use intelligence, the physical body as well as the emotions to learn. The emotions play a crucial role in their social agency and their desire to act.

### Learning 'on the job' of activism

Terry's activism is 'accidental', thrown into a series of events that would dominate his life for more than five years from the time his son David was arrested in 2001 by the United States Government on suspected terrorism charges. Terry and his son David are both Australians. Whilst David was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, a United States military prison based in Cuba, Terry in response to these events advocates for his son's release and learns skills along the way, or 'on the job'. In the dialogue below, Terry is reflecting on the learning that has occurred for him. By being an advocate for his son, he learns through what he calls the 'process'; the process to which he refers is activism. He is reflecting on whether or not he has developed greater expertise or skill along the way in the practice of campaigning:

I don't know, I don't really know to be honest, it's just something you develop along the way through that process; whether you call it a skill or something that you do out of necessity. I've never really looked at it as a skill... Yeah, see the other thing is but who's to say five years down the track all of it won't be gone, I'll be back to normal, gone and forgotten, it's in the past. ...Although, I suppose what I have been through in the past five or so years could be put to other uses? (Terry)

Terry has started out as a newcomer on the periphery of practice – his learning has involved developing new knowledge and skills. He is learning about international systems of government, and developing new knowledge about legislation and laws relating to terrorism. He is

also learning to speak publicly for the first time, and then to perfect this role through practising the action of public speaking time and time again at forums across Australia. He explores this development of skill in the following quote:

Oh yeah, public speaking, I suppose if you look at that one, it's a skill, the other thing that you develop, what would you call it, is when you speak to a cross-section of very influential people. A lot of people would say they couldn't do that, talk to high profile people, but I come from the perspective that he's blood and bone like the rest of us. (Terry)

These skills and expertise are not formal knowledge gained in the classroom or seminar; they are skills and knowledge developed through the experience of situating himself in the processes and practices of activism. Learning occurs by having the opportunity to practise and to perfect what he is doing as an activist. By situating himself in the practices of activism, or in what Beckett & Hager (2002: 302) claim as the 'hot action of practice', Terry develops greater expertise. In the hot action of activism, in the art of making judgements about what to do next and how to go about doing it, Terry is becoming more expert at what he does.

A great deal has been written on learning in the workplace in recent years (Beckett & Hager 2002, Billett 2004, Boud & Garrrik 1999, Lave & Wenger 1991). It is widely understood that adults learn all of their lives and that a majority of this learning occurs in the workplace (Hodkinson & James 2003). Clearly, learning of a similar nature takes place in the unpaid work of social activists; that is, social learning or learning in a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). It is acknowledged that learning is an inherently social process situated in our daily interactions with one another. This is developed further by Lave and Wenger (1991) who claim:

A theory of social practice emphasises the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning,

cognition, learning and knowing. It emphasises the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and actions of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world. (pp. 50–51)

While learning is based on our social interaction in the workplace, it is often informal and happens in daily interactions with one another as we work (Beckett & Hager 2002, Billett 2004, Boud & Garrick 1999). Individuals are able to develop their skills through participation in a community of practice; they develop through engagement with one another a shared repertoire of skilful practice. They may start as a newcomer on the periphery of practice, and through time and opportunity, move to full participation and engagement in learning (Wenger 1998). People learn from one another all the time, from the newcomer just acquiring new skill to the master practitioner or mentor who may pass on their knowledge, skills and experience to the novice in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). Terry's learning is social; it has occurred through his engagement with other activists and through his contact with support networks and key people that have assisted in his campaign:

Well, with the support groups, then that blew out, it [the campaign] went national and then international, you know, overseas. ... You get a lot of help through different people and ... in the early days, we had some help from David's first lawyer and the support groups out there are absolutely brilliant. (Terry)

Whilst activists learn on the job, they also develop critical thinking skills; this reflection on systems and structures that create inequality assists in further developing their expertise.

### Critical thinking and reflection

Hugo has been involved in activism for most of his life. His family fled to Australia in 1975 in order to escape Pinochet's Chile. From a very young age, Hugo learned about socialism from his parents and relatives who were involved in the *résistance* movement against the Pinochet regime. Hugo joined the Labor party at the age of 12 and became involved in the party and more broadly the union movement. As an arts undergraduate student he was elected secretary of the Nation Student Tertiary Union and never completed his degree. What followed was a lifetime commitment and involvement to socialist politics and activism. In the following quote, Hugo discusses how important it is for activists to question and critique ideas; he views this as a 'part of the trade' of activism. When asked what skills he believes activists needed to be effective in their practices, he responded by exploring the importance of asking critical questions:

Definitely the asking questions thing is probably the main thing; tenacity, courage, but they tend to come with circumstance – yet I'm a believer that even the greatest coward will be courageous in certain circumstances; passion is probably the main thing, and you need to be self-conscious of what you are doing. (Hugo)

Hugo thinks the ability to think critically about systems and structures and how they connect to inequality in the world is essential; he links this view with what he refers to as being 'anti-systemic', but what he is actually referring to is critical thinking and his own reflexivity (Edwards, Ranson & Strain 2002).

You have probably caught me at a time when I am particularly reflective about this in fact; I'm waking up at night sometimes thinking about this. But yes, reflective, but I remember when first reading Descartes, at least this guy's got one thing right, at least if you keep asking questions you will get there. (Hugo)

Reflexivity or the meta-cognition of Hugo is skilful reflection on his own practices as an activist. Freire knew the learning associated

with critical reflection very well and referred to this in the term 'conscientisation' (Freire 1972b: 81). Through critical reflection, individuals would understand their own and others' oppression and seek to change it. Freire warned about what he termed fatalistic or naive consciousness and argued for a critical consciousness; this self-awareness would encourage people to act to change their circumstances (Jesson & Newman 2004). This 'conscious awakening' (Freire 1972b: 81), or learning to question or critique in order to understand the circumstances that create oppression, is what Hugo refers to as 'being anti-systemic'. Hugo has learned through his activism about politics and international systems of government:

I very much think ideas, what I would believe to be about structures and world systems, I learned through my direct action; it's not like I was going to seminars or anything, sometimes maybe. But it did embed for life the spirit of questioning for me, if nothing else you would never be happy with the first answer, and you know I am amazed just with my own teaching and stuff how many people are happy with the first answer or, if they are not happy, do nothing. (Hugo)

The ability to question situations and circumstances is a specific skill that activists develop in their practices. Being able to reflect on the discourses of inequality and to reframe or reconstruct these discourses assists activists with making meaning (Foley 2001). While critical thinking may require the use of reason, Brookfield (2005) argues critical thinking needs the power of theory, that is, an understanding of critical theory in the work of the Frankfurt School, and he brings together the connections between critical theory, activism and change in the following quote:

After all, critical theory and its contemporarily educational applications such as critical pedagogy are grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more compassionate world. Central to this tradition is a concern with highly practical projects – the practice of

penetrating ideology, countering hegemony, and working democratically. (p. 10)

In activists' learning, critical thinking and reflection are entwined in their developing knowledge. For these activists, learning is also embodied – they use the mind, the emotions and they also use the physical body to learn. This holistic competence contributes to powerful learning as knowledge extends beyond the use of cognition, but is embedded in activists' everyday practices.

### **Embodiment and activism**

Passion and commitment, Bahar reveals, are important drivers for her activism. Bahar is employed as a community worker in the Turkish community. Everyday in both her paid and unpaid work Bahar is working on issues that affect the women in her community. From responding to women who have just been beaten to speaking at community forums about domestic violence, Bahar's practice is rich with skill and driven by emotions. In the following quote, Bahar discusses the importance of passion in driving her to act:

At the end of the day, you've gotta have that passion, it's got to come from the heart; if you don't have that passion, do not think of this work as a career. If you think about dollars, you shouldn't be there. All these people in the environment movement, they are not working because the trees are going to thank them, the oxygen is going to reward them – they are doing it in their own time because they want to, that's why they are doing it in their own time. (Bahar)

Why is the body and in particular the emotions so important in understanding the learning practices of activists? Adult activists' learning is embodied, their learning is holistic; they use reason, the physical body and the emotions to make meaning. Whilst their learning is associated with reason and cognition and they develop knowledge in this way, it is also deeply embedded in the emotions.

The activists in this study frequently refer to emotions such as passion, frustration and anger contributing to their purpose, drive and agency as activists. Their passion, frustration and desire for change, simply their desire for a better world, precipitate a motivation to act and to change it.

Adult educators have long known that there is intrinsic connection between the emotions and learning (Beckett & Hager 2002, Beckett & Morris 2004, Fenwick 2003). They know that, if learners make an emotional connection to the curriculum, their learning is much richer and deeper. O'Loughlin (2006) argues the historical tie of the emotions, their irrationality and women's expressive role have hindered our understanding of emotions and their importance in promoting learning:

The characterisation of emotion as irrational because of its supposedly compulsive and disruptive nature, but also because of its historical association with women and 'the feminine', is contested; likewise its depiction as threat to the functioning of cognition and rationality. The philosophers of the body, Nietzsche, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, placed emotion at the very root of all intersubjective encounters. (p. 126)

Eyerman (2005) claims that the emotions are a source of motivation in social movements and emotions such as anger can actually drive activism. He goes on to state that "even the experience of fear and anxiety, not uncommon in the midst of protest, can be a strong force in collective actions" (p. 43).

The Cartesian tradition of education, thanks to Descartes, has long dominated educational thought. Historically it was believed that the body had no connection to the mind and the development of knowledge. This 'split' between the mind and body, has been influenced by the traditional approaches to pedagogy embedded in the foundations of behaviourism, which has been dominant in both Western European and Australian education systems. This point is

argued well by Beckett and Morris (2004) who believe the connection between mind and body continues to 'remain dualistic':

In Western European education, the highest status is reserved for the most abstract and immaterial learning, irrespective of its utility. The lowest status is accorded to concrete material learning, much of which we acquire in daily embodied actions. The utility of this latter learning has hitherto been under-recognised, although with 'lifelong learning' there is a chance for giving it greater prominence in adult education pedagogy and policy (p. 123).

Activists' learning is a case in point for rejecting this Cartesian tradition, because for activists the mind, body and emotions are intrinsically connected and all contribute to effective learning. This knowledgeable practice is often tacit and implied and not usually identified or articulated as learning (Foley 1999). This 'concrete material learning' or lower status knowledge is often viewed by educators as the 'junk' category of knowledge (Beckett 2008 in press, Schön 1987). There is a need to understand why some people have more knowledge than others, but rather than view the whole person as a site of knowledge as Schön (1987) states, "outstanding practitioners are not said to have more professional knowledge than others, but greater 'wisdom,' 'talent,' 'intuition' or 'artistry'" (p.13). Schön develops this point further:

Unfortunately, such terms as these serve not to open up inquiry but to close it off. They are used as junk categories, attaching names to phenomena that elude conventional strategies of explanation. So the dilemma of rigor or relevance here reasserts itself. On the basis of an underlying and largely unexamined epistemology of practice, we distance ourselves from the kinds of performance we need most to understand. (p. 13)

Beckett (2008 in press) outlines an 'Australian model' of 'integrated holistic competencies' in his epistemology of workplace learning (p. 1). He raises the importance of taking seriously embodied

knowledge and believes "low status knowledge, typically called 'intuition' or 'commonsense' or 'know how', is receiving long-overdue critical attention" (p. 2). Beckett's contribution to the literature on workplace learning is important because he focuses on the hitherto previously neglected area of the whole person or embodied competence at work.

For the activists in this study, learning is not only connected with cognition, but often preceded by emotions such as intuition, a feeling or a sense that they are on to something, tenacity fuelled by determination and a drive towards a goal or outcome that rarely sways – a desire or longing for knowledge in order to achieve change. There is purpose and utility associated with this desire, that is, the desire to change the world. These embodied feelings contribute to activists' agency and their motivation to learn. The environmental activists the study by Kovan & Dirkx (2003) similarly revealed that their primary motivation for activism was both intellectual and emotional, and they frequently referred to "being motivated by head, heart and spirit" (p. 109).

The holistic practices of activists include using the physical body to develop greater skill and expertise. Indeed, the use of the physical body is an important element in these activists' learning. For example, being a part of a picket line or a public protest, or scaling a large building in order to write a sign of protest, are examples of skilful use of the body; it requires balance, coordination and artistry. The act of physically climbing a tree as a part of a forest blockade is another example of how activists use their bodies in protest. The use of physical skill, music, dance and performance are frequently a part of the culture, colour and movement of activism (Couch 2004).

### **The 'accidental' activist**

So what are the differences in learning for 'circumstantial' activists, those activists who are propelled to engage in activism due to a

series of life circumstances? In the case studies outlined in this article, Terry and Bahar are 'circumstantial' activists' and Hugo is a 'lifelong' activist. For Terry and Bahar a series of life circumstances has contributed to their learning practices as activists. Differently, Hugo was taught about politics from an early age by his parents' introduction of socialist politics via family discussions around the kitchen table. Circumstantial activists tend to have less formal training, whilst lifelong activists are likely to have participated and become engaged in activism through being socialised by parents who are political, or by being involved in student politics, or by practising activism in social movements. Circumstantial activists tend not necessarily to 'identify' as activists, whereas lifelong activists do. Both 'lifelong' and 'circumstantial' activists' learning is enhanced through socialisation in the workplace of activism; and both groups' learning is embodied – they use the mind, body and the emotions to learn.

### A tentative conclusion

It is little wonder in the present environment of adult education that has given importance to lifelong learning and in particular learning in the workplace that the rich work of activists should provide us with insight into their holistic competence as practitioners. It has been argued that the learning practices of activists are not only social and informal but are also embodied. It is claimed that learning is embedded in the everyday interactions of practice with other activists, and is intrinsically connected to the mind, the physical body and the emotions. Passion, anger, frustration and a desire to change the world drive motivation and action. It is difficult to comprehend that an epistemology of learning, such as this, is so often neglected by adult educators as a legitimate form of knowing. It is important to question why there is a significant absence of discourse on 'radical adult education' in the mainstream literature on adult education in Australia, particularly when the learning practices of adult activists are educationally so rich. It is hoped that this article assists in giving their learning greater prominence.

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## Use of development centre methodology to focus workforce learning strategies – case study: NSW Department of Community Services

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*This paper examines the use of development centre methodology to measure the gap in performance for fieldwork staff in a social welfare organisation. The process follows the construction of a capability framework, a set of work-based simulations for participants and the use of a 360-degree instrument. These processes are combined to measure and compare capabilities of both high level performers and a random selection of staff at various levels within the organisation. The results are analysed in the context of a range of organisation development options.*

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### Introduction

The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) is a mid-sized government agency with more than 4,000 staff, principally involved in promoting the safety and well-being of children and young people and to build stronger families and communities. DoCS field staff number over 2,000 and are structured in a basic four-level hierarchy. In embarking on a professional development strategy for these staff, it was decided that an assessment needed to be made of both current and desired future workforce capabilities.

Ultimately DoCS elected to utilise the development centre approach to inform the strategy. During 2007, development centres were constructed for each of the four levels with sample groups balanced by urban and regional work locations; male and female; length of service and other distinguishing criteria. In assessing workforce capabilities, DoCS chose the development centre approach as it has several advantages over other methods including:

- participant performance can be objectively assessed (by independent observers),
- use of realistic simulations of on-the-job scenarios and measuring performance against a capability framework, and
- it is behaviourally-based, which makes taking developmental action much easier and more practical since there is clear guidance on what the person should **do** (not on **who** they need to be).

It is superior to alternative methodologies (for example, surveys) in that it is an illuminative research approach that provides data based on observations from simulations designed to challenge and stretch participants. Using a cross-section of staff at a given level will demonstrate the differences between high, medium and low level performers, with reference to a capability framework. It is difficult to gain this type of meaningful data using other methods.

What constitutes sufficient, good or bad employee performance can be highly subjective. The development centre process endeavours to reduce subjectivity through the use of multiple simulations, rater/observer moderation and validation through 360-degree feedback.

Revealing the gap between current performance and desired performance as articulated by a capability framework allows for specifically targeted interventions (for example, training, coaching, research, action learning, immersion experiences). It also provides guidance as to which themes and messages should be utilised through existing professional development vehicles. This work could be undertaken within the organisation, however, in this case we partnered with an external consultancy, Bendelta, to gain advice to enhance our internal view.

### **Establishment of context**

The starting points for this process were:

- a robust capability model with behavioural anchors based on multi-modal methods
- a 360-degree questionnaire based on the above model
- a series of behavioural simulations (including participant briefing, scenario descriptions and observer rating manuals)
- a complete description of the development centres, including key components, logistical considerations and a complete guide to running the sessions
- A series of successfully run development centres, producing:
  - benchmarked results for all targeted organisational roles against all capability areas
  - a detailed report for each development centre participant, summarising their results from both the 360 assessment, and the simulations
  - one-on-one feedback sessions looking at the link between each person's results and their individual development plans

- a clear appraisal of each cohort's strengths, weaknesses and developmental needs (with the view to building internal benchmarks in the future)
- recommendations on appropriate developmental steps.

### **Creation of capability model**

A capability model built from valid and reliable data is the critical element in this process. This model was constructed utilising available organisational data and a series of behaviour event interviews. This process gets below the surface of observable behaviour to identify the personal capabilities of people who are outstanding or consistently high performers in their role. A project team was trained to assist with the interview process. After Bendelta and DoCS staff interviewed half of the sample group each, a panel analysed the data to identify an array of capabilities that distinguished excellent performance.

To identify the sample group for behaviour event interviews, DoCS management was asked to nominate people who were known high level performers in their previous role (on which they would be interviewed). Nominations were based on two main criteria: people recently promoted from their previous role, and general reputation as a superior performer within that role. Where we identified a greater number of people met these two criteria than were needed for the interviews, a random selection of people was made from the list of staff.

A total of 29 interviews were conducted across all four levels of field work staff. To a large extent, this group reflected the demographical breakdown of DoCS as a whole (for example, gender distribution, different geographical regions). The interviews conducted were one to one and a half hours' duration with individuals who described key events in their experiences in their previous role. Each interview involved gathering data using a modified form of grounded theory. 'Grounded theory' was coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to

describe the concept that theory is generated by an iterative process involving the continual sampling and analysis of data gathered from concrete settings (Pidgeon 1996). It is a process of inductive theory-building, based firmly on the observation of data.

In this case, participants were asked to relate stories concerning when they perceived they were effective and/or ineffective in the workplace. Participants were also asked to relate how they felt and what behaviours they exhibited at the time of the incident(s). As Butler (1991: 648) notes, this critical incident method was consistent with Buss' and Craik's (1983) 'act frequency analysis' approach to construct validity in that it asked people to nominate specific intentional behaviours related to the workplace. Interviewers recorded key dialogue, which was later transcribed into a typed document.

The next step concerned the coding of transcripts into emergent 'capability' themes using content analysis. A panel was formed to read independently the copies of transcripts and list ideas for codes which related to outlining capability categories. Although one of the panel members was familiar with the literature on capabilities in the child welfare sphere, they had no presumptions about what these groupings would be.

The panel met to discuss the codes and to reach a consensus concerning which codes should be applied to the data. A third stage involved codes being independently applied to one transcript for each role, and revisions made after another meeting between two panel members. These steps were repeated for the remaining transcripts. After coding, chunks of data were arranged independently into common code files and themes were categorised. Two members of the panel then met again to compare the results of the categorisations and draw conclusions.

#### (i) Job descriptions

To feed into the above data, we also looked at specific tasks or duties that made up each job role using a functional job analysis approach. The basic task data were already available from DoCS Human Resources Branch. The job descriptions looked at four roles: Caseworker (CW), Manager Casework (MCW), Manager Client Services (MCS) and Director Child and Family (DCF).

#### (ii) Best practice research

Existing data and research from relevant international sources were then reviewed to identify overlaps, omissions and intersects between the job analysis data and behavioural event interview results.

#### iii) Existing DoCS caseworker competency model

The caseworker capability model was cross-referenced with the caseworker selection competency areas used for staff recruitment. There was a strong alignment between many of the focus areas. The existing assessment centre competencies for the Manager Casework level also informed the capability model for that level. The APS Executive Leadership Capability model was also used in the development of the capability indicators for the Director Child and Family position.

#### (iv) Practice standards

The DoCS practice standards include desired behaviours required to function effectively in the NSW child welfare environment. To complete the representation of capabilities needed for performance at DoCS within the four positions, information from the standards was analysed in accordance with the capability themes.

#### (v) Review and verification

The review and validation proceeded in several steps. The panel first reviewed the model as a whole. It then revised the individual

capability indicators to ensure that the language appropriately reflected the target audience. The model was then presented to the Project Sponsors who made further suggestions for changes to language in line with DoCS' practice lexicon.

(b) Notes on the capability model

The following criteria were used to select the final capabilities for the development centre and training needs survey. Each capability had to be:

- DoCS content-specific
- substantive
- moderately homogenous
- developable
- defensible (credible for developmental purposes)
- valid (most likely to predict long-term success in the job)
- able to make the difference between average and outstanding performance.

For these reasons, a development-based capability model may differ from that used for selection purposes. In recruitment, it is best to target capabilities that are the most difficult to change through training and supervision in combination with those that can be impacted. For example, in the child welfare field, one can teach people how to fill in the right form or recognise the indicators of abuse and neglect, but it is much more difficult to change someone's values about children and families (Child Welfare Institute 2005).

### The development centres

The development centre involved participants completing tasks which simulate the activities they could be expected to carry out in the workplace. Twelve behavioural simulations and in-tray exercises were utilised. A total of 62 staff across all four job roles were randomly selected to participate in seven individual development centre days.

Critical to this process was a team of well-trained observers who took on many roles including: playing a character in a simulation, observing participant behaviour, making notes on participant answers, and participating in ratifying the ratings across the observer group. Observers were carefully selected for their vocational experience, knowledge and seniority. Multiple methods, scenarios and assessors were applied to evaluate each participant against a given capability.

A 360-degree questionnaire was also created for each of the four job roles. This instrument was delivered to participants on-line and results sent anonymously to the external consultancy Bendelta to ensure individual confidentiality. The 360 aimed to explore the degree a person exhibited certain behaviours and capabilities at work. Participants completed the questionnaire themselves and their manager or supervisor and up to five others (including peers and subordinates) were also asked to complete them.

### Key findings

The development centres produced generally positive results across the four position levels. Strong scores were commonly obtained across the capability model, particularly for the 360-degree survey. There were certainly more strengths than potential gaps. In many cases, the lowest rated capability area was not extensively larger than the top rated capability area. Broken down to the behavioural level, however, there were some stand-out opportunities for each position.

Table 1 provides a brief description of these opportunities for each role. With current scores generally high across the capability model, there is more opportunity to look at some areas than others, namely the following.

**Table 1: Potential program focus areas**

<p>Caseworkers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal effectiveness (managing emotional costs of role, building empathy, dealing with difficult conversations/clients, heightening client engagement)</li> <li>• Advanced analysis and professional judgement (linked to assessment and intervention practice)</li> <li>• Organisational management (e.g. organising information systematically)</li> <li>• Building networks – this would aid holistic case management (taking into account the client's whole picture), strengthen interagency ties and provide an avenue for peer support</li> </ul>
<p>Manager Casework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal effectiveness (e.g. conflict resolution, self and other awareness)</li> <li>• Organisational management</li> <li>• Managing others (performance management and talent management)</li> <li>• Resource planning</li> </ul>
<p>Manager Client Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal effectiveness for leaders (e.g. persuasive communication)</li> <li>• Change leadership</li> <li>• Managing others (performance management and talent management)</li> <li>• Leading results</li> <li>• Resource planning</li> </ul>
<p>Director Child and Family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal effectiveness for leaders (e.g. persuasive communication)</li> <li>• Change leadership</li> <li>• Managing others (performance management and talent management)</li> <li>• Visionary leadership</li> <li>• Strategic thinking</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

Before recommendations were made, some central considerations were observed. It was important to ensure development options were consistent with:

- the strengths and lower scoring areas detailed in the report
- the organisation's environment and future needs
- the additive capability model (and key role requirements)
- other people systems and processes within the organisation
- existing learning and development programs, where practical, and
- developmental best practice.

Ultimately, the following initiatives were recommended.

- A review of current learning and development programs, as well as the development of new programs according to the areas identified and developmental best practice.
- Identification and integration of systematic immersive techniques (e.g. secondments, simulations etc.) across the four levels.
- Repeat the development centre and 360-degree process at significant strategic time-points (e.g. at a two-year interval followed by a five-year interval) in order to measure organisation progress against the capability framework.
- Creation of a succession management program integrative of talent management, leadership development, career management and career progression.
- Creation of a tiered, multi-faceted leadership program for the roles with management functions (which could be linked to a succession management program), that reflects the changing responsibilities of each management level, along with the developmental areas for each position.
- Executive coaching for the highest of the four levels.
- Construction of a five-year strategy and implementation plan around the above recommendations (including a feasibility study or cost-benefit analysis).

## Different approaches and capability development

The notion of developmental best practice can be discussed with reference to the effect of different approaches on the depth of learning. Varying learning methodologies must be considered

when creating or re-designing programs to develop different types of capabilities.

Explicit technical knowledge is only the tip of a 'job capability' hierarchy that largely consists of deeper and more complex behaviours and capabilities. While formal development strategies, such as large-group training, lectures or reading may be sufficient to build surface-level, technical know-how, they may not be adequate to build deeper learning, whereby skills become part of a person's natural repertoire.

Relational-type learning (such as reflection through supervision, journals etc.) can be extremely effective for behaviour modification and learning, although it is generally 'learning by doing' that can have the greatest bearing on long-term capability development. These activities and strategies can be thought of as 'immersion' techniques, which involve on-the-job or experiential strategies and programs.

Many of the lower scoring capabilities for each level in the DoCS development centre model would best be developed by more immersive tactics. These can be further integrated into current programs, and/or new programs can be developed to target more specific areas.

### Example immersion techniques at DoCS

DoCS immersion strategies for staff include planned work-based activities, such as the following:

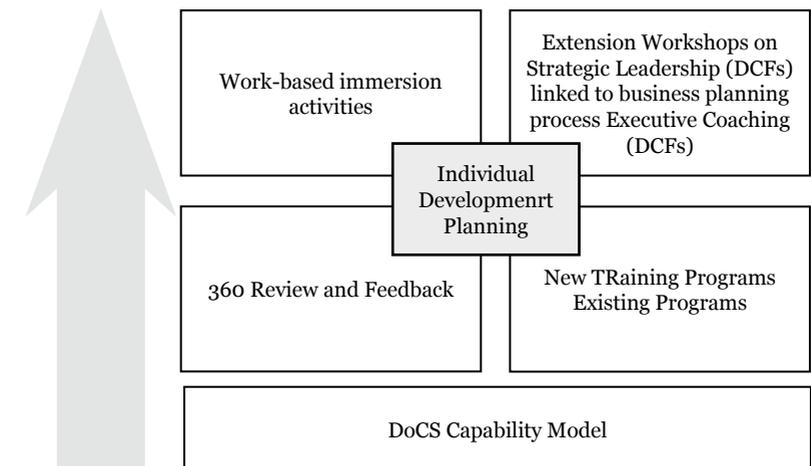
- on-the-job action learning
- work-based projects that connect to formal training programs (e.g. a post-training project relating to each topic)
- enhancement/change in existing role (e.g. new responsibilities)
- higher duties in a position at the next level
- secondment
- job rotations

- participation in project teams, working groups and/or governance groups
- sponsorship, co-sponsorship or participation in identified projects
- shadowing/learning from others
- learning in non-DoCS environments (e.g. in community bodies, pro bono activities etc.)
- running Strategic, Corporate or Divisional Planning meetings (senior leaders)
- secondment to another government agency
- active participation in professional organisations
- developing a change plan with a group of managers
- training with a strong emphasis on immersion techniques, such as simulations.

DoCS already had many of the above techniques operating within pockets of the organisation prior to this process, however, they were quite ad-hoc and unconnected to a deliberate learning strategy.

### A recommended development framework

Immersion strategies are only one part of an effective developmental framework. The range of additional choices and the basis on which they have been made can be explained as in the figure below. The key issues are as follows:



### Multiple-method learning

Within the model, workshop/program learning is reinforced by immersion techniques (such as post-course tasks), individual planning processes and awareness building (via something like a 360-degree assessment). People will get the most from learning activities that provide for varying learning styles and ongoing development activities. Accordingly, multiple methods are used systematically so that staff capability can grow over time, even after discrete learning events such as workshops. This is a powerful framework that leads to long-term gains.

### Individualised development

Individual development planning should be the kernel of a staff member's development program, as each person has their different strengths, weaknesses and learning preferences (demonstrated by the range of findings). To an extent, this process was set in motion for participants in the current project by the 360 feedback process, and this could be continued within a self-directed learning framework. Such methods will assist DoCS staff to reach their full potential by identifying development needs and noting progress towards the achievement of agreed goals.

Importantly, planning can align individual objectives with DoCS' strategic direction and program needs. At the executive level, development planning will be integrated into the strategic and business planning process. This is an immersive technique that can enhance strategic thinking, which was found to be one of the lower rated areas at the highest of the four tested staff levels.

### Immersion learning

Development activities should be based on learning methodologies with an experiential focus. Activities and examples for staff should be relevant to their experience and working environment to obtain maximum benefits for DoCS and each staff member.

### Tailored to DoCS' context and capability model

The developed capability model (founded on data from high performers in each role, along with additional sources) can provide the frame of reference for each developmental element within DoCS. This guarantees that the strategies target the behavioural elements that serve to propel staff towards heightened performance.

### Strategic leadership activities

Facilitated strategic and business planning sessions (or retreats) offer an excellent opportunity to incorporate some developmental activities as an extension to planning processes. Such a strategy serves to align senior leader development with the overall direction of an organisation.

Executive coaching that capitalises on individual strengths and helps to mitigate possible weaknesses can have an appreciable impact for Director-level staff.

### Implications beyond this project

The implications for the current project extend beyond the learning and development area within DoCS. The work also identified the key competencies that are most predictive of success at the four field work levels of the organisation. DoCS will leverage this work further to see how the capability framework can be integrated into its systems, leadership and resources.

Career management and succession planning are key areas that can be aligned to the capability model and possible organisational objectives (e.g. staff retention, engagement, development).

### Career management and succession management

DoCS Learning & Development team will liaise with the Human Resources Branch and other relevant stakeholders to examine the possible integration of results (and the capability model) into two people-related processes – career management and succession management.

### Career management and career progression

Here, the capability model can be used for:

- **Development**

The behavioural anchors serve as a point of reference for people's strengths and gaps within their current role. The model could be aligned to planning systems and individual development initiatives.

- **Progression**

The tiered nature of the capability model acts as a guide for staff. Staff can clearly see the different behaviours and capabilities that are required at higher levels within the Department. For example, if staff members at level three wished to aim for a future level four position, they may wish to concentrate on building strategic thinking capability, which is an area that increases in importance at the higher level.

- **Job planning and fit**

Similarly, staff can use the capability model to determine whether their personal preferences and skills are likely to align with the capabilities required within their current role or possible future roles. In this way, the model can be used as a measure of job-fit. This dovetails also with leader succession management.

### Leader succession management

Succession management is now the focus of many government organisations in Australia, which is in step with global trends across top private companies. Business logic dictates that organisations should look ahead into the future and review their requirements for leadership and professional talent and expertise. It is also a good discipline to anticipate and plan for the loss of key personnel and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of current leadership populations.

Government departments can be proactive in developing talented managers to prepare them for greater levels of responsibility.

In DoCS, as the capability model demonstrates, different skills are required at different position levels. What makes a good caseworker may not necessarily be what makes an exceptional manager of caseworkers, although many core skills do overlap across the two positions. A formalised succession management program could make the jump from 'professional' to 'manager' to 'leader' a less difficult transition for individuals. It can also lead to heightened organisational efficiencies, such as the cost and speed of appointments, the identification and risk management of potentially 'at risk' positions, and heightened success of appointees in management and leadership positions.

Career management and succession management are interlinked and could be part of the same program. They would also be significant change management programs. Input to performance management and recruitment systems could also be a next step.

### **The organisation benefits gained from this model**

In recent years the NSW Department of Community Services has embarked on a systematic and wide-ranging process of reform. The professional development of field staff is integral to this reform process. A basis for benchmarking current skill levels, for measuring or defining best practice and for articulating how the gap between these concepts is narrowed is critical to the success of this initiative. The development centre as outlined provides such a process.

Insights from a development centre model into the generic development needs for all categories of field staff will enhance organisation confidence in the overall investment in learning and development, ensuring it is allocated in the areas which require attention.

Improved identification, then targeting of how professional development activities are linked to key developmental practice

areas and are subsequently delivered (rather than 'one size fits all') means there may be savings in terms of less time for staff out of the office attending training and utilising a range of alternative modes of learning.

The value of this project is in the valid and reliable identification of the strengths and weaknesses in key field staff roles, having greater certainty about appropriate interventions to take (in both selection and development) and how we benchmark in these areas.

The results of the development centre represent another perspective for the organisation to measure its perceived skills gap. In the past, the allocation of funds, and the response to organisation learning and development needs for field staff, have been largely reactive and based on delivering outcomes for major and minor projects, meeting workforce planning requirements and on discreet needs analyses.

The economic investment in this model should yield a significant economic benefit for DoCS (that is, several times its cost), and has the potential to impact greatly on the quality of service that DoCS provides to its clients and the community.

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## A volunteer training framework

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and

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*Volunteering SA (VSA) has responded to the need to revise and expand the training offered to volunteers. It has developed a volunteer training framework to provide structure and guidance for the sector in making policy and financial decisions about directions and type of training that volunteers require and desire, where the training can lead and what recognition can be given for it. Basic entry-level volunteer training is the focus of the framework. However, other planks in the training framework include training and identifying pathways from basic entry-level volunteer training to accredited training. This approach offers clear linkages and pathways for volunteers and organisations, and it is anticipated this will build a culture of continuous service improvement.*

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### Introduction

Social, economic and political changes that have occurred over recent times have had a significant environmental impact on the volunteer sector and volunteer training in particular. At the local level in SA, this has included legislative changes such as the Volunteers' Protection Act 2001 (SA) and the Children's Protection Act 1993.

As a result of these changes, a number of trends have emerged that have highlighted the need to review and develop volunteer training to ensure it adequately addresses current legislative, organisational and volunteer requirements. These trends include: generational differences, use of technology and growth of environmental concerns.

Volunteering SA (VSA), the peak body for volunteering in South Australia, has responded to the need to revise and expand the training offered to volunteers.

VSA has developed a volunteer training framework to provide structure and guidance for the sector in making policy and financial decisions about directions and type of training that volunteers require and desire, where the training can lead and what recognition (formal or otherwise) can be given for it.

Basic entry-level volunteer training is the focus of the framework. However, other planks in the training framework include training and identifying pathways from basic entry-level volunteer training to accredited training. With this in mind, VSA has reviewed and expanded the partnership it has with TAFESA so that the close working relationship with the public training provider will support the training framework.

VSA also worked with the Office for Volunteers and TAFESA on a project to standardise entry-level volunteer training as another step in strengthening the training framework and ultimately sustaining the sector with highly skilled, competent volunteers.

It is well documented that volunteers, who experience job satisfaction, feel valued and are acknowledged for the work they do, have been placed in a job role commensurate with their skill level and interest and have been given opportunities for further training, are more likely to stay longer in the role. Training benefits the organisation, the clients and the community, and these benefits include increased confidence, quality service provision, reduced risks and openings towards employment and further learning.

A well trained and developed workforce of volunteers is more critical to the successful performances of the volunteer management system than any other single factor. (Standard 5, National Standards for Involving Volunteers 2001)

In this paper, the VSA training framework is discussed in relation to the TAFESA partnership and the standardisation of volunteer training project outcomes. A case study is presented to illustrate an application of this training framework.

### **Partnership**

Volunteering SA and TAFESA have been in partnership since 2000 and both recognise the benefits to be gained through mutual cooperation and alliance in the field of education and training and in the development of the volunteer sector. VSA and TAFESA have a commitment to a shared vision for education and training of volunteers and volunteer managers.

The mutual recognition of the core business of each organisation is a key factor in the working of the partnership. This fact both differentiates and unites the two organisations in mutual cooperation to provide the best possible mix of training opportunities and pathways for future training and employment for volunteers and volunteer managers:

**Volunteering SA** delivers non-accredited training targeted at three training ‘markets’:

- volunteers
- volunteer managers
- volunteer-involving organisations

**TAFESA** delivers accredited training, including:

- Certificates I, II, III in Active Volunteering
- Certificate IV in Community Services (Volunteer Management)
- Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Community Services (Volunteer Management)
- Individual accredited units of competency
- Elements of training within accredited units of competency where the intention is to continue on to the completion of a full qualification
- Recognition of Prior Learning.

Volunteering SA owns the curriculum for the three volunteer management courses and TAFESA is the training provider. The partnership, governed by a memorandum of understanding, began with this arrangement and has over time expanded to take on other functions to mutually support each other's training and education programs.

A licencing agreement exists between TAFESA and Volunteering Australia that enables TAFESA to deliver the three Active Volunteering certificates. This arrangement supports the VSA Training Framework by providing pathways for volunteers to accredited training.

### **Volunteering SA training framework**

Volunteering SA has developed a training framework as a means of structuring the training it delivers to the sector to represent a coherent and sequential plan of development and skill acquisition

for volunteers, volunteer program managers and volunteer-involving organisations. The training framework is designed to take account of individual and organisational training needs, a range of levels of skill development and readiness of people for training. It also has multiple entry and exit points and leads to potential pathways to further training.

It could also be used in conjunction with the Volunteer Training Audit Tool (which is discussed in the next section of this paper, ‘Standardisation of volunteer training’) as a basis for identifying training needs and setting directions for future development of volunteer training options.

Volunteering SA anticipates that the training framework will also inform policy and program development in industries that utilise volunteer support and on whom they are dependent for the delivery of their services; Such industries include community services and health, recreation, sport, environment and conservation, museums and heritage, animal welfare, housing and the justice system.

It is widely recognised that volunteering is a pathway to employment and, where a training option can be added to the volunteering experience, this not only benefits the volunteer but also adds value to the industry (Volunteering SA Inc. 2006). For example, community and welfare organisations claimed 26% of all volunteer hours in 2000 (ABS 2001); and research from NSW, undertaken by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (2002), has shown that 80% of volunteer hours for Home and Community Care programs are concentrated in four areas – food services, respite care, transport and social support.

Workforce development that includes volunteers is on the agenda of at least two Industry Skills Boards – Service Skills SA, which covers sport, recreation, tourism, hospitality wholesale, retail and personal services, and Health and Community Services, which covers health,

community services, correctional services and public safety. It is anticipated that this new framework may inform policy and program development for these industries as volunteering is a pathway to employment and, where a training option can be added to the volunteering experience, this adds value for the volunteer as well as to the industry.

The training framework is a three-step approach which acknowledges that, to sustain and develop volunteer involvement in organisations, individual volunteers, volunteer program managers and volunteer-involving organisations have training requirements.

The framework that VSA has developed assists each of these groups to be trained within a national framework for participation, learning and sector development and in the process meet Standard 5 of the National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not-for-Profit Organisations. The foundations for this framework are:

- training must be affordable and accessible
- training is about learning and integrating that learning into practice
- training is one of the most important levers for sustainability of the sector and volunteers need to be able to transport their learning from one organisation to another without having to repeat that training; data from the 2000 Census survey (ABS 2001) indicate that 34.8% of people volunteer in more than one organisation
- volunteers are worthy of being trained and supported in their learning
- training needs to have accredited pathways that can be accessed if volunteers want to take up that option
- organisational learning will assist in sector development and service improvements for the end service user
- each generation of volunteers has different training needs and expectations.

## TRAINING FRAMEWORK

Three steps:

**Entry level**  
**Developmental level**  
**Leadership – master classes**

Training can be:

**Optional**  
or  
**Compulsory**  
and  
**Can lead to best practice**

The framework targets three ‘markets’ – volunteers, volunteer program managers and volunteer-involving organisations. The training that is required may be compulsory or optional, and all training should lead to best practice for the organisation and add to the sustainability of volunteer participation in the whole sector.

Entry level training options:

- suite of modules – twelve sets of volunteer training materials have been developed and are freely available; these are listed in the next section of this paper
- three-hour workshops – for the delivery of these modules of training
- on-site and off-site delivery – to meet organisational and volunteer requirements
- linked to VSA-produced resources – these are available for purchase from VSA to support training delivery
- pathway to TAFESA certificates and recognition of prior learning

Developmental level options:

- pathways to further education and training such as the Active Volunteering certificates and other related vocational qualifications

- links to accreditation and the National Standards for Involving Volunteers
- foundations for leadership

Leadership – master classes:

- master classes for experienced volunteer managers
- initiatives and reforms
- taking account of research and current trends and issues facing the sector
- pathways to higher education

The Volunteering SA / TAFESA partnership works collaboratively to advance the training framework and provide opportunities for volunteers and volunteer managers at the developmental and leadership levels in particular.

Volunteering SA is in the process of establishing partnerships with other organisations that can also play a role in contributing to the process and outcomes of the training framework.

As part of the vision for the training framework, the CEO of Volunteering SA submitted a proposal to the Office for Volunteers for funding to undertake a project to standardise basic training for volunteers that is offered by the Volunteer Resource Centres in South Australia.

Twelve training modules were developed and form the basis for the entry level training in the training framework.

### Standardisation of Volunteer Training Project

This project was funded by the South Australian Government through the Office for Volunteers. The outcomes of the ‘Standardisation of volunteer training project’ support the implementation of the Volunteering SA Training Framework.

The standardisation of basic training delivered to volunteers by the Volunteer Resource Centres in South Australia means that common ground is covered, portability of skills from one organisation to another is made easier, recognition of training undertaken is a straightforward process, replicating training in these areas is unnecessary and it removes the need for each organisation to spend time and money duplicating the same training materials.

The outcomes of the project included:

- (a) Twelve modules of training:
- Be an effective volunteer
  - Customer service
  - Engaging Gen Y
  - Introduction to mentoring
  - Volunteering with the frail aged
  - Working in teams
  - Developing grant applications
  - Introduction to effective communication
  - Introduction to marketing
  - Volunteers and paid staff
  - Introduction to governance
  - Introduction to risk management
- (b) For each of these modules, there is:
- a workbook
  - an electronic presentation of the training material
  - presentation notes
  - a certificate
  - a pathways statement with information on links to accredited training

All of this material is available as a free download from the Office for Volunteers website: [www.ofv.sa.gov.au](http://www.ofv.sa.gov.au)

Each training module is designed to be delivered in a three-hour workshop, either at one of the Volunteer Resource Centres or on an organisation's premises. The training topics represent basic training for volunteers in skills areas most required by volunteer-involving organisations and represent the entry level training in the Volunteering SA training framework.

The workbook, certificate (which outlines the basic aspects of the training workshop) and the pathways statement (which outlines the recognition of prior learning process and identifies the national competency(ies) with which the training is most closely aligned) assist volunteers to make decisions about moving to the **developmental level training** and facilitates the progression to accredited training. **Leadership level training**, such as the master classes, can be accessed during and/or following completion of accredited training.

These twelve training modules also assist organisations to meet the requirements of Standard 5 in particular of the National Standards for Volunteer-involving Organisations.

Another outcome of the project was an Audit Tool (available on the Office for Volunteers' website) that is designed to assist volunteer-involving organisations identify training requirements either at entry level, developmental and/or leadership level and prioritise training development plans according to need and availability of resources.

Following is a case study that illustrates how the Volunteering SA Training Framework can provide guidance and create pathways to assist volunteers and indeed organisations make coherent, well-considered choices about training options available to them.

### **Case study: The Hills Volunteering Project**

The following case study outlines the training pathway taken by a volunteer at The Hut Community Centre at Aldgate, South Australia. It illustrates the effectiveness of the Volunteering SA Training Framework in assisting volunteers to select training options that maximise their chances of achieving their goals.

Chris was originally referred to The Hut Community Centre by a Job Network Agency as part of the Work for the Dole Scheme. He began with reception work for two half-days per week and also worked with the project officer on The Hills Volunteering Project doing administration, research, networking with people from the sector and promotional work.

The Hills Volunteering Project at The Hut where Chris worked aims to build the capacity of volunteer-involving organisations (in the Adelaide Hills) to attract and retain volunteers and to provide enhanced pathways to further education, employment and community service outcomes for volunteers. A partnership with the Mt Barker Campus of TAFESA has been formed to facilitate the outcomes of this project.

Within three months, Chris was volunteering three days a week with the Hills Volunteering Project 'and loving it'. He went on to say that he loved the team work, the supportive environment and the opportunities it provided, enabling him to bring with him skills from previous work including interviewing and counselling skills and interpersonal skills to effectively work with a diverse range of clients.

Chris was also a participant in the project and as such had access to the training opportunities offered to volunteers who expressed interest in being involved in the project.

It was as a result of this volunteer experience that Chris then identified that he wanted to be more involved in the volunteer sector

and seek paid employment in this area of work. He therefore pursued study/training options presented to him as a participant of the project and found the Active Volunteering qualifications fitted well with his plans.

Chris enrolled in the Certificate II in Active Volunteering at the Mt Barker Campus of TAFESA. He then set about compiling evidence to support his application for recognition of prior learning (RPL), having realised through his volunteer work that he had skills and knowledge from previous life experiences that he was able to utilise to good effect in his volunteer work.

He also found that the orientation training he received when he began volunteering could be included as part of his evidence for recognition of prior learning for a competency – 'Be an effective volunteer' – in the Certificate II in Active Volunteering. In relation to the Volunteering SA Training Framework, this is entry-level training being recognised and providing a pathway to accredited training – developmental level training.

Chris applied for RPL for all but one competency and was successful. He had a large portfolio of material to support his application. He chose to study the occupational health safety and welfare competency to ensure he had current knowledge about work practices related to his newly chosen field of endeavour. Commenting on this RPL experience, Chris said: 'I loved it because it rounded up my skills and experience from previous work and gave me confidence and direction for my future'.

He explained that this new found sense of confidence boosted his self-esteem and gave him renewed energy and optimism to map out new directions for his future. He commented that, when he looked back on the RPL process and took stock of all he had done, what he had achieved and the skills and knowledge he had accumulated, he remembered thinking at the time: 'I have all these skills and they have

been formally recognised; I should look at what to do next ... it gave me the confidence to take the next step and enrol in the Diploma of Volunteer Management.'

Chris explained that

all this has happened at an important point in my life and having the opportunity through the RPL process to virtually take a review of my life and see I have a lot of skills was an invaluable experience. The process of getting recognition for what I'd achieved in work and life experiences was like a launching pad, it was a pivotal experience, a landmark in my life.

He is currently studying the Diploma of Volunteer Management at TAFESA and says: 'I have now entered the next phase feeling now on a career path and working towards a definite goal'. In relation to the Volunteering SA Training Framework, this is developmental level training that will provide Chris with a pathway to further education and training – leadership level training.

Commenting on his volunteer work, Chris recounted:

... looking back, I see now that my volunteer work had more relevance because I was gaining skills and knowledge that could be used, and now my volunteer work and the training along the way is assisting me to reach those goals - which is all part of the process.

I'm now feeling more confident in myself and in my ability and am continuing to network for career options and I have a couple of options in the pipeline at present. While still unemployed, interestingly I don't feel that way as I'm working towards employment and feel confident about a successful outcome in the not too distant future.

## Conclusion

The Volunteering SA Training Framework adopts an integrated approach with a place for volunteers, volunteer program managers and volunteer-involving organisations – adding value and

contributing to the sustainability of volunteer participation and the infrastructure for volunteering.

This approach offers clear linkages and pathways for volunteers and organisations and it is anticipated this will build a culture of continuous service improvement.

Volunteers have the right to be trained and rewarded for undertaking the training and this approach provides further opportunities for volunteers who want to build on their volunteering experiences and have a pathway to further education.

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## Websites

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- TAFESA: [www.tafe.sa.gov.au](http://www.tafe.sa.gov.au)
- Volunteering Australia: [www.volunteeringaustralia.org](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org)
- Volunteering SA Inc.: [www.volunteeringsa.org.au](http://www.volunteeringsa.org.au)

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## **'They're funny bloody cattle': encouraging rural men to learn**

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Donald Neighbourhood House & Men's Shed & School of Education,  
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*Our paper examines and analyses the contexts and organisations in rural and regional communities that informally and effectively encourage men to learn. It is based on a combination of local, rural adult education practice and a suite of studies in Australia and elsewhere of learning in community contexts, most recently into community-based men's sheds. It is underpinned by both experience and research evidence that many rural men tend to have an aversion to formal learning. The intention of our paper and its specific, practical conclusions and recommendations is to focus on and share positive and practical ways, demonstrated through practice and validated through research, of encouraging rural men to learn.*

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## Preface

Our paper is written collaboratively by a learning centre coordinator and practitioner (Soapy Vallance) from a rural Victorian town (Donald), and a researcher in adult and community education (Barry Golding) based at University of Ballarat, a regional Victorian university. We have structured our paper with separate but related sections written from our respective positions as a practitioner (Soapy) and a researcher (Barry).

The paper is one of several longer-term outcomes of two Research Circles into *Encouraging men's learning* funded through the Adult, Community and Further Education Board in 2005–6 through University of Ballarat, with Mike Brown and Annette Foley and coordinated by Rowena Naufal.

A man will travel miles to buy a good sheep dog, but he won't walk across the road to learn how to breed one (Vallance 2007)

Men earn, women learn (McGivney 2004)

## Introduction

Our paper completes Research Circles for us in several important senses. While we were both born and schooled in Donald and still have families there, our adult working, learning and research paths have only crossed relatively recently. What we share is our concern for the well-being and learning of rural men. Our particular concern is about rural men's general reluctance not to participate in formal learning. Our paper essentially deals with the factors that tend to turn men off – and also turn them on – to learning.

### What turns rural men off learning?

Soapy

My Research Circle paper (Vallance 2007) was called 'They are funny bloody cattle: study into attracting men into learning'. My idea of

rural men as 'funny bloody cattle' is based on my observation and experience that men's reactions to learning opportunities are easier to address from the view of the 'herd' rather than from the perspective of the individual 'bull'. I observe that while individual men can seldom be deliberately 'herded' to learn formally, their group learning behaviour is more predictable. If you follow where men instinctively 'graze' to, you get a good idea about how they might be gently guided, as a group, into other productive learning paddocks and pastures.

There is a limited range of formal learning venues and options available for rural men, compared with those of their city brothers. Even when formal venues *are* available, rural men tend not to gravitate to them. The available learning and training settings in country towns other than neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Australia tend to be found in halls, workplaces, fire stations, football sheds, community men's sheds and anywhere that does not resemble a school or classroom environment. Older rural men typically had quite negative experiences of formal education and left school relatively early and therefore tend to steer clear of more formal settings.

Recollections of bad experiences of school are therefore a major reason that many men will not go back to learning, especially in a formal situation located in a school or classroom. These bad experiences have carved scars into young minds that often last a lifetime. Sadly, these negative experiences are still prevalent for many rural boys in today's schools. Then, as now, the ability to pay for an education (or more recently, the ability to pay back the higher education debt) discriminates against people with the lowest incomes and the most limited access to formal literacies, including information and computer technologies (ICT). So the cycle goes round and often spans generations in the same family.

Men will more readily learn informally, in groups, as opposed to going it alone. As for women, some of the most valuable life skills

people learn are learnt informally through trial and error, interaction and experience, through involvement at home, work and in the community. Men tend to learn best when they know they're not doing it. Men learn effectively and informally by working side by side: from one another, in sheds and workshops, outside, through field days, on work sites, in the workplace and in groups – wherever men gather regularly. Many farmers say they learn by looking over the next farmer's fence.

A major amount of men's learning is done through hands-on experience. It is older men with negative and limited experiences of formal learning that are less threatened or intimidated by hands-on learning. The hands-on method allows them to control the rate of learning and when they do it. Hands-on, community projects are very effective and a painless way of getting men involved in their community and back into learning. They provide a sense of belonging, friendships and social connectedness for men who might otherwise have had no regular contact with other people within their community. Importantly, they treat men as part of the solution to the problems men face, rather than men as *the* problem.

Barry

Given the relatively low proportion of older men involved in formal learning in rural communities, I have tended to focus my research on where learning *does* take place informally in rural areas, in spite of, and in part because of the formality that Soapy talks about. My particular and recent research interest has been on what informal learning men experience in groups in community organisations and settings. My research with colleagues through the University of Ballarat has identified the particular importance to Australian rural men of learning experiences available through regular, hands-on practice and involvement. Aside from adult and community education (ACE), these experiences are particularly important for rural men in Australia through land care, sporting and senior citizens clubs

(Golding & Rogers 2002), voluntary fire and emergency service organisations (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2003), and more recently in some parts of southern Australia, through men's sheds in community contexts (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007). I have a particular interest in where rural men are learning informally, in part because of their more limited access to formal learning organisations found in larger cities (Golding 2006).

I acknowledge from the outset the academic and theoretical limitations of characterising and stereotyping **all** rural people and their learning preferences by gender or age on the basis of statistics and averages. Men and women, people generally and rural communities have diverse and different interests and needs over the lifespan. However, I am also concerned about ignoring evidence of continuing inter-generational inequity by location and gender. Men's participation in adult and community education has been significantly less than for women in Australia for over 50 years. I am particularly concerned about what is being repeated for many young rural people, particularly young men, as a consequence of their significantly different post-secondary learning destinations away from Australian capital cities. As an illustration, in Victoria in 2006 (CEP 2007), around half as many 18 year olds in the Wimmera-Mallee area of rural Victoria (where Soapy lives) were enrolled in a post-secondary course as in the capital city, Melbourne. In both Melbourne *and* the Wimmera-Mallee areas, approximately half as many male 18 year olds enrolled in a post-secondary course as did 18 year old women<sup>1</sup>.

Men who have stayed and worked in Australian rural towns have tended, over generations, not to undertake higher levels of formal education that lead to professions. The majority of professional roles in rural communities: in education, nursing, aged care, welfare and local government administration have tended to be occupied

1 Post-secondary enrolments of 18 year olds from Melbourne: 62.0% male, 80.4% female; in Wimmera-Mallee: 21.8% male, 42.4% female.

by women. This tendency has been exacerbated by the need, during the ongoing drought caused by climate change, in 2007 affecting two-thirds of agricultural areas in Australia, for people on farms, particularly women, to learn new skills, commute (Devers 2007) and work off farm. In broadacre agricultural areas in Australia, over 60 per cent of farm income is now generated off farm.

The formality of learning – and also the extent to which it is mediated by and dependent on access to information and computer technology (ICT) – increases with the perceived status of the education sector. As formality and the required technological literacy levels increase, older rural men tend to be excluded from participating. The 'highest' and most diverse forms of education are most accessible in Australia's biggest cities where levels of participation typically are significantly higher. The cost of travelling and moving to larger towns to study is beyond many rural people. The highest academic and economic value is placed on the most abstract knowledge in the most formal classroom settings. Hands-on skills learned in rural communities over generations of practice tend to have lower status and currency unless they are accompanied by certification – which rural men tend not to have.

Given the high value governments now place on training for industry, competency-based vocational education and training (VET) is more heavily subsidised by governments than other forms of education. While some rural VET programs are available through adult and community education (ACE), the diverse range of programs are typically only available through larger regional, city-based, technical and further education (TAFE) institutes or by fee-for-service through private registered training organisations (RTOs). The main pathways between school, ACE, VET and higher education sectors are construed as being upward in this hierarchy. Non-vocational, non-accredited learning in ACE centres and neighbourhood houses is regarded as close to the bottom of the hierarchy and is increasingly user-pays,

putting it further out of reach of rural people struggling with drought. Many of these factors of formality and cost apply to both men and women.

### **What entices rural men to learn?**

Soapy

As coordinator for eleven years in the Donald Neighbourhood House and recently, of the Donald Men's Shed, I am in a good position to summarise a few things that I've noticed that entice men back to learn. The new technologies men face in work and in retirement at home is certainly an important one, The daily tasks like banking, checking the news and weather, sending and receiving messages and getting information like market prices are increasingly dependent on having access to a computer and being on-line. Children and women in rural families have tended to learn and develop these skills first and to a higher level. For older people, the need to keep contact with children and grandchildren can be a positive 'hook' to entice them to learn how to email and use a mobile phone. Men without children or a partner are understandably completely adrift and often don't know where to begin.

For all of their bravado (and in part because of it), men are reluctant to join clubs and organisations on their own. Men feel less threatened by signing up to a group to share tasks with other men. They are much more likely to join organisations that build on and value their existing friendships, skills and interests. This is where community-based men's sheds come in. All older men have a lifetime rich in skills, interests and experiences. These 'men of experience' mentor and learn informally with and from other men.

### **Men earn, women learn**

Soapy

On the front of this paper I have said that: "A man will travel miles to buy a good sheep dog, but he won't walk across the road to learn

how to breed one.” My point is that men’s pride often causes them to go out of their way *not* to do what logic suggests they *should* do when faced with a tight situation. With more limited friendship networks than women, many rural men who have worked largely in their own in small businesses and farms find themselves isolated in retirement and unable to roll with the difficulties and changes that life tends to throw up with age, and particularly with unemployment and retirement. These difficulties can include sickness, disability, loss of income, family home, partner, farm, mobility and shed or workshop. While men have more time in retirement, they are even less likely than when they were working to present for learning for learning’s sake. There has to be a key to draw them in informally.

One of the important keys is regular, hands-on activity and friendships with other men. Any adult without regular contact with other people or the community in which they live is in a difficult, lonely and potentially dangerous and debilitating situation. It is important that we acknowledge and tap into the experience and wisdom of people towards the end of previously active and proud working and community lives. The starting point is to find a way of acknowledging and informally sharing what men already know, rather than teaching them what they don’t know. This is where men’s sheds come in.

Barry

I have previously written that, when rural men are up against it, they tend instinctively to work harder at the same thing, sometimes in a desperate and futile way, in order to save face. In the context of a widespread and prolonged drought in most parts of southern Australia, many farmers are resolved to ‘stick it out’ and wait for better times, since the option of leaving the land, their communities and extended families is an admission of defeat. Tragically, but not surprisingly, the rates of suicide for rural men are extremely high.

What we know from Australian research about men’s aversion to formal learning as adults has been observed elsewhere. McGivney (2004, p.1) concluded that, in the United Kingdom,

... a major block to participation was the belief, held by many, especially working-class men, that involvement in learning after the age of 25 would involve a loss of face (‘a step up for women and a step down for men’, as one respondent to a survey put it). There was also evidence of a widely held belief that only work or career-related learning was relevant for men. The title of [McGivney’s 2007 book] *Men earn, women learn*, encapsulates this view which is apparently held by a large section of the population.

### **What is it about men’s sheds?**

Soapy

I reckon that community men’s sheds are probably the best tool available for getting men reconnected to the community and back to learning and living. Our shed has involved men in a heap of valuable community projects. In the past many of these men have just sat around home with little to do apart from dodging the rolling pin. The shed has given them a whole new outlook on life and a much brighter future.

Mateship has developed between men that would not normally have crossed paths on a regular basis, had they not been involved in one of the shed’s projects. When someone is absent for any length of time, the other shed members become concerned about their well-being. They have, in effect, become a big community family. They quickly develop a sense of belonging to the men’s shed and the projects they work on. Members seek out other members, promote the shed to the local community and are always on the lookout for potential new shed projects.

The shed has become a great place for skills transfer, with members mentoring each other as they work together on community projects.

They teach each other new skills like welding, woodworking, painting and mechanical skills. They learn skills from tradesmen as they work on projects in groups. The shed members are constantly on the lookout for members of the community with skills that can be passed on through the shed. Our experience so far is that around one half of men have gone on to other learning or training outside and beyond the shed. For some, it is computer courses. The projects men get involved in allow them to learn as part of a group, but to work also on individual projects when they feel comfortable

One of the most remarkable, informal benefits our shed has produced is men's improved knowledge of their health. Some of it is through health sessions, but most of it is through informal interaction and discussion between themselves about their own conditions and symptoms. In several instances, men have gone to their doctors as a direct consequence. Men's involvement in the shed has led to improvements in men's well-being, health and happiness, as observed by men's wives and families. Men have become more settled and their anxiety conditions have improved dramatically. We have many instances of improved mental health for men who have recently retired, been widowed, retrenched or moved off farms due to drought and illness or who have experienced long term unemployment. Many of these men have been positively and permanently reconnected to their community as a direct consequence of participation in the community men's shed.

Barry

Community-based men's sheds are particularly important for men not in paid work. However, they don't work for all men. Not all men are attracted to the idea of socialising and learning informally in a community-based workshop setting. While those who *are* attracted come for a wide range of reasons and from very diverse situations, Golding, Foley and Brown (2007, p. 5) suggest that men come from two different groups for somewhat different reasons. The first group

are men who (for whatever reason) are not in regular, paid work and who live with a partner. Such men benefit (as do their partners and families) from regular activity and social contact with other men outside of the home. These men with partners tend to be relatively secure, older, retired, ex-tradesmen with a number of skills to share in the shed and in the day-to-day running and management of the shed. The 'push' to go to the shed for these men often tends to be related to 'underfoot syndrome' at home. In retirement in particular, most couples understand the desirability of having some parts of their social lives, weekly activities and interests as separate and different. The 'pull' of the shed for these men with partners tends to come from a lifetime of working with other men in hands-on or workshop-based practice, which they enjoy but no longer have ready access to other than in their own sheds and workshops. In the shed they are in a strong position to mentor, learn from and socialise with other men and give back to the community.

The second group are men without partners, many of whom live alone. Such men benefit from 'getting out of the house' simply to be with other people. The 'push' factor tends to be loneliness and isolation; the 'pull' factor is essentially social. The shed also provides such single men with an opportunity to learn informally new skills and, like the other group, to contribute positively to the community. Men in this situation tend, on average, to be younger than retirement age, have had less shed-based previous experience, less current access to a shed at home, and most importantly, have had much more difficult lives. These difficulties sometimes include one or more of limited and negative experiences of education and training (particularly school), periods of unemployment, separation from partners and children, substance abuse and disability. Importantly, men who live alone, including the higher proportion of single men subject to a range of other social and health problems, are also significantly less comfortable about sharing the shed with women than are men with partners.

## Why can't sheds complement neighbourhood houses?

### Soapy

We've proved in Donald that they can. The Men's Shed is auspiced through the Neighbourhood House. Men who come to the shed are basically part of the 'House' and know they are welcome to come to it when they are ready. The legal liability, safety, administrative and financial parts of a men's shed organisation that are a hurdle for many groups wanting to set up a shed are relatively simply handled through an existing incorporated association, in our case the Neighbourhood House.

### Barry

It is likely that existing links between neighbourhood houses and learning centres and community-based men's sheds in Australia will strengthen as men's sheds become better known and understood in each State and Territory. There have been positive collaborations already in Victoria (where the Australian Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre peak body is based) and Tasmania (where the Neighbourhood House sector played an important role in the 2006 Tasmanian Men's Sheds Conference organised through Pete's Shed in Bridgewater). There is considerable interest in community sheds from Learning Centre Link in Western Australia that includes many neighbourhood houses in its network.

There are some tantalising parallels between the development of neighbourhood houses, primarily for women, since the mid-1970s, and the recent, rapid growth of community men's sheds in Australia. Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown (2007) in their paper, 'Houses and sheds', have identified some parallels and differences. Their paper focuses on some of the complex, strategic political choices that have been made around gender in neighbourhood houses since the 1970s and in men's sheds very recently. One choice is to be overtly gender specific (discriminatory) and therefore have neighbourhood houses

for women and sheds for men. A second choice is to be gender neutral and de-emphasise gender as part of an inclusive politics. The naming of a house as a neighbourhood house and a shed as a community shed would reflect this second position. These choices can be paramount when consequent educational decisions and strategies are developed relating to the design and establishment of learning environments, pedagogies and programs conducive for women, men or both.

## Conclusion

### Soapy & Barry

We have, as a conclusion, some recommendations to offer as a guide for other people and communities who want to get men more involved in learning. They are based on our respective experiences as an adult learning practitioner and researcher. For a start, avoid trying to 'teach' men as individuals, particularly older men, without acknowledging what they already know and can share in groups. Learning is most effective in groups as well as by working with and through other community organisations where men already gather, such as football clubs and fire brigades, and very recently, through community men's sheds. It is not enough to second guess what men want, put it on a learning centre program and expect men to walk in the door. It is very likely they won't.

It is important to recognise that the number of men served by existing community sheds remains very small compared with the increasing number and proportion of men who are experiencing isolation and problems with their health and well-being. If you see the potential for starting a community men's shed, find out where the closest one is (see the Australian Men's Sheds Association list on [www.mensshed.org](http://www.mensshed.org)). Go and have a talk to someone who has already set one up, and if possible visit several sheds to get an idea of the different possibilities. Get information from the previous national men's sheds conferences via the same website and obtain a copy of the guide

to *Setting up a men's shed* (Donnelly & Van Herk 2007). Not all sheds will be the same and it is likely your local one will need to be different again. What happens in the shed, what is made and which organisation or sites it should be auspiced through should be decided by the men, who will use the shed in close consultation with your local community. Anticipate problems and difficulties finding a safe and secure site, but the men you gather will gladly do most of the work – and learn much from the process.

Once you are set up, make sure that there are agreed safe routines and rules. It is essential that someone is responsible and sensitive to individual and group needs at all times that the shed is open. Remember that there are some men for whom sheds are not the answer. Sheds will work well for men not in paid work who enjoy (and probably miss) opportunities to develop friendships through hands-on, regular, workshop-based activity with other men. As for women, learning opportunities will be maximised for men in all adult learning organisations if they listen to and take account of men's diverse needs at different ages and stages, and if they enhance and collaborate with other community and government-funded organisations and services.

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*Barry Golding's and Soapy Vallance's lives and work trajectories have recently intersected, in research and practice respectively, at the Donald Men's Shed. Barry, with family roots in Donald, is introduced in a parallel journal article. Soapy, as the Coordinator of the Donald Learning Group, is also a key figure in the development of the associated community men's shed and a respected mentor to many other shed-based organisations in north-western Victoria. We attempt, in the dialogue of our narrative, to share our contention about the value of researcher and practitioner collaboration and the importance of valuing people, practitioners and place in learning and research narratives.*

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### **“Do the thing you think you cannot do”: The imperative to be an adult learner in order to be a more effective adult educator**

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*Despite the fact that we are learning more and more about the particular challenges and possibilities of teaching adult learners, we may still be overlooking – or forgetting – some of the most fundamental aspects of what makes an effective educator of adults. This paper addresses this oversight by reminding adult educators of the imperative of being adult learners to gain continuous new insights into their craft. The reader is taken on the author's own journey of realising and enacting this imperative.*

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You gain strength, experience, and confidence by every experience where you really stop to look fear in the face... You must do the thing you think you cannot do. (Eleanor Roosevelt)

The best learners – people for whom learning a skill comes entirely naturally – often make the worst teachers. This is because they are, in a very real sense, perceptually challenged. They can't imagine what it must be like to struggle to learn something that comes so naturally to them. Because they have always been so successful in their learning, it's impossible for them to empathize with learners' anxieties and blockages. (Brookfield 1995: 62)

This paper serves two purposes. First, it is a call to educators – and to adult educators in particular – to look fear in the face and do the thing(s) you think you cannot do in order to be the teacher you should be. The second purpose is to address the potential fallout caused by any adult who attempts to meet this call: I will explore the particular challenges for an adult to learn something that they are convinced they cannot learn. In order to explore these particular challenges for adult learners/educators, I will take you along on my own personal journey of learning the impossible as an adult. During these travels, I will juxtapose my own learning struggles and roadblocks with my substantial successes in learning: I am a tenured university professor, a proven 'best learner' in Brookfield's terms, but, as I discovered, a highly inept learner when it came to looking my fears in the face. In this way, I will expose the intricacies that comprise each of us as learners, I will expose general misconceptions about skilled or 'best' learners, I will expose general misconceptions about who are the best teachers, and I will expose the power of perception as it works (or works against) us all as adult learners/educators.

Why would a person be convinced that they *cannot* learn something? Are we not by now aware that we must be lifelong learners, that we learn throughout our life experiences, not just in a formal academic setting such as high school or college? But when you have *never* been able to do a certain thing, and you have substantial years behind you during which you have *never* been able to do that certain thing, it is not a stretch to conclude that it must then be impossible. That one

thing is different for each of us – it could be algebra or speaking in front of an audience or standing up for yourself at work or playing basketball or riding horses, of which you are terrified. Although that one thing (or maybe more than one thing) that seems impossible is different for each of us, it is *important* for each of us too. As Eleanor Roosevelt asserted, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do". I somehow imagine that she was speaking directly to adults, 'grown-ups' who have become set in their ways, convinced of their inabilities, and held back because of it. But *why* must we do the thing we cannot do? My answer: to be better educators, particularly adult educators.

For me, the impossible in terms of my learning has always had to do with the body. I was one of those academically gifted students who, throughout every single year of school from the beginning of my formal education to the end, dreaded nothing more than gym class. If the activity required movement with an object that was roundish and rolled, I could not do it. Let me rephrase: I would fail miserably and, more often than not, publicly and embarrassingly as well. Picture this one instance from my high school years: during a game of volleyball, I stopped paying attention, unable as usual to actually effect any kind of hit that would get the ball back over the net. It was just then that the ball came from nowhere, hit me forcefully on the head, and bounced smoothly to one of my teammates. Besides being embarrassing, this event seemed to be a message from the universe trumpeting, "For God's sake, don't try to actually *play* the sport – just stand there and you'll do a better job!"

Team sports have never made any sense to me whatsoever. Even when I applied my considerable academic abilities to understanding them, that understanding always eluded me. And although I was interested in health and exercise, and although as a teenager I was very active with aerobics, walking, biking, jogging, dancing and more, there was just something about gym class that rendered me clumsy, sluggish and completely uncoordinated, even out of shape.

I did try. At least, I think I did. But even then, at those quite young ages, I had enough years of failure behind me to believe I might never succeed at any sport or gym class-orchestrated activity. I began to joke that there was a sports gene and I just did not have it. I had gotten other blessings in my genetic make-up, but athletic ability was not one of them. This simple kind of explanation did make me feel slightly better. Still, I have always *wished* I could succeed at some sport, wished I could find one athletic activity at which I excelled, wished I was one of those students who could do it all: athletics *and* academics.

University was such a blessing: no gym class. During my undergraduate studies in Canada, I fell in love with the study of 'human' communication or communication studies. I threw myself into my academics and in the end it paid-off with a scholarship and teaching assistantship to a graduate school in the United States. I began my teaching career and slowly, gradually, learned by trial-and-error how to competently perform some of the functions of a teacher: planning each class session, asking and answering questions, giving feedback to students, facilitating discussions and other learning processes, using class time wisely, and designing the overall vision for the course. During this period, I also found myself sailing through my graduate courses. It was a lot of work, that is true, but it was as if I was meant to be doing it, as if the field of human communication was made for me.

My shame, embarrassment and failure at any athletic endeavor were now all far behind me. Or were they? Indeed, I was constantly being rewarded for the abilities I *did* possess. But I was also frequently reminded of my lack of talent with anything of the body. I guess it started as a little cross-cultural misunderstanding. You see, since I am from Canada, people I met in the United States assumed that I must love winter activities, that I lived to ski and skate. I don't like skiing,

and I couldn't skate to save my life. I was starting to feel like a very bad Canadian, a disappointment in representing my fair land.

So it happened that a friend of mine told me she was taking a course for fun: ice skating. Upon hearing this news, I poured through the university catalog and discovered that there were many recreational courses offered for small units of undergraduate credit. I was working so hard with classes and teaching, but I thought I could fit in just a couple of hours a week for something like ice skating. And this was when my journey to do the thing I thought I could not do began.

Pop Quiz: What can make a second-year graduate student nervous? Facing a roomful of 25 students on the first day of class? Possibly. Defending her master's thesis before her committee? Maybe. Taking an itsy-bitsy one-credit undergraduate course in ice skating? Definitely. Even though I was registered for the course, I almost did not go on the first day. I had to force myself to put one foot in front of the other, down the street, down the hill, across the parking lot, into the arena. The first class was merely an orientation. That meant that we wouldn't actually be on the ice until the next class. And so, for the next class – the first *real* class – I went through all of the nerves *again*, almost didn't go *again*.

I had forgotten. I had spent so many years being successful and praised in the academic world that I had shaped for myself that I had forgotten this sick feeling of dread when faced with sure public embarrassment and failure, maybe even bodily injury. Moving despite that sick feeling of dread I laced up my skates – which for the entire ten weeks of the course never stopped cramping my feet painfully – and inched shakily onto the ice, holding firm to the side boards. Not telling how long I stood there, holding on for dear life, blocking the path of other students who seemed to have no trouble gliding out into the centre of the rink. Oh yes, I had forgotten *this* sickening feeling, too: being the only one who can't do something, the one left behind,

the one holding up the others, the one who is the source of ridicule. And I had *signed-up* for this?

Well, yes, I had. So when my instructor glided past gracefully, I stopped her and – trying to keep my voice from quavering – asked, “Any pointers?” To which she replied, “You just pick up one foot at a time and put it down,” demonstrating effortlessly as she spoke. To which I replied, “You mean I have to PICK UP MY FEET?” But by the end of the session, I had done just that. Hesitantly, shakily and going nowhere fast, I had picked up my feet and moved about and not crashed to the ground. The world had not slipped out from beneath me.

I have to admit, it was weeks before I stopped dreading that class, but I kept going. I kept picking up my feet and putting them down, trying to glide, trying to speed up, trying to execute stops that did not involve falling to the ground. I even invited two friends of mine to be my buddies on Buddy Skate Day. So over time, there were only two things I still dreaded. One: the days when the instructors would get creative and try to get us to play team skating games. Was that necessary? Sure I am the worst skater in the class, but must you rub my nose in it? Two: my student from my (meaning: I teach it) public speaking class who was also a student in my (meaning: I take it) skating class.

In many departments of communication, teaching associates start out with teaching public speaking. This was around my fourth time teaching that course and I was finally starting to believe I wasn't a completely horrible teacher. I was no longer feeling sorry for my students for having to suffer through the experience of having me as a novice instructor. But seeing this one student face me in class as we discussed and practised the techniques of public speaking, and then also seeing her virtually float past me doing her little spins and tricks on the ice, I was presented with some strange-making experiences.

We teach what we like to learn and the reason many people go into teaching is vicariously to re-experience the primary joy experienced the first time they learned something they love. (Stephen Brookfield)

Of all the methods available for changing how we teach, putting ourselves regularly in the role of learner has the greatest long-term effect (Brookfield 1995: 50)

From then on, I became a better teacher. Significantly better teacher, actually, because I finally had the epiphany that many times the people who teach a subject are emotionally-speaking the worst-prepared people to be teaching that subject. Why was I teaching public speaking? Because I was and had always been good at it, and because I love the study of communication. Despite occasional appropriate and slight speech anxiety, I had always come alive in front of an audience. Many of the anxieties, fears, even panic attacks that my students referenced were all foreign to me and not accessible to me in that context. But since I had forced myself to face up to the other side of myself as a learner, the side that failed and fumed about it, I was once again in touch with a whole host of bad experiences that I had long-since blocked, experiences that I was previously unable to access as part of the teaching process. I recently re-read these words that I wrote for an assignment in my second year of graduate school:

Fall quarter I took a skating class, confronting one of my own long-held fears. The anxiety I felt as I laced up my skates was incredible. Being a graduate student is merely the act of pursuing in-depth that which we are already good at; it had been a while since I'd faced that terrible before-gym-class feeling so familiar from my school days. Consciously, I was aware of all these elements before I took that class. What surprised me was the new connection I began to feel with my own students. I can never know the depth of communication apprehension some of them feel before giving a speech, participating in group work, conducting an interview, even having an every day conversation. In my life, something like communication apprehension is really

just a lofty academic term. But I cannot leave it on that level. I must do more than imagine the discomfort of my students. I must connect it with my own discomfort in certain learning contexts, and make that connection work to their advantage as learners.

As indicated in the previous quotations, Brookfield views this process of putting ourselves regularly in the role of learner as precisely so helpful because it allows us to put ourselves in the role of other and see our practice from the perspective of other: "We see our practice from the other side of the mirror, and we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing" (Brookfield 1995: 28). When you are an educator doing the thing(s) you think you cannot do, you are experiencing "crashing dissonance" (Brookfield 1995: 61), dissonance between being a learner who *can* and suddenly a learner who *can't*. I began to realise that my inability to naturally learn everything is in fact a strength as a learner and as a teacher. At the time, I did not have Brookfield's eloquent words to interpret or reinforce what I was doing, but having had the epiphany on my own, I kept it up. From then on, I sought more of the things that I could not do, crashing dissonance all over the place (and none too gracefully, I might add). Next up: swimming.

I have always loved the water, having grown-up surrounded by lakes and ocean and more ocean, but I never learned to swim an actual stroke. And little wonder: I managed to suck in and suck down what feels like buckets of water any time I put my face into the water without plugging my nose (and it's hard to swim laps while holding your nose!). Let me tell you, the front crawl becomes more of a flailing crawl when every few feet you choke and gasp your way to the surface. Why couldn't I do this? I implored my swimming instructor to help me figure out how not to ingest the entire pool upon each submersion. My swimming instructor, although talented and skilled in the sport of swimming, was less than insightful in her instruction of swimming: "You just do it", she explained to me. Of course she would say that,

she had been swimming since she could crawl and had never had a moment of failure in that context.

With the skating and now the swimming, I began to ponder and problematise the role of teacher. I made the effort to ensure that in my own classroom I was not perpetuating this situation of being the person worst-positioned to teach my students about communication. I learned to move beyond the functional duties of a teacher to focus on connecting with students and creating a learning environment that empathised with their worries, fears, and, for them, all-too-convincing feelings of can't. I shared more of myself, my failures and not just my successes. I was trying to teach them a skill, but I appealed to their minds too. If they could think they could do it, if they could dread it a little less, if they could face it and build-up successes (or at least non-failures), then everything might work together to make them feel at least competent, if not eloquent.

By now I was teaching courses in interviewing and small group communication as well. No surprise, one of my students was in a swimming class at the same time as mine. Her class was actually swimming conditioning, whereas I was with all-but-beginners. As she swam steady lap after lap in the deep end, I fluttered and flailed in the shallow end. Then I would present myself as the competent professional in class.

How much does it hurt your credibility with your students to appear in public as being very bad at something? I didn't want to think about it. But at least I was out there too, just like them, trying and trying and learning and growing and failing and succeeding – all of the things I was asking of them. That had to count for something. I hope.

Because my swimming had not progressed as much as I wished in that first class, I did take a second course. This time the instructor informed me that the reflex of how not to breathe in but only out when under water was something you had to learn as a kid. Oh great,

thanks. So I was hopeless, a lost cause? Forget her. I filled my tub with cool water and practised putting my face in, blowing out steadily through my nose. If my students could see me now!

It was a good thing I learned how to swim some strokes because the next new-to-me skill that I wanted to learn was SCUBA diving. Having been introduced to snorkelling and loving the water so much, I vowed that SCUBA was something I would learn. I could not wait to be able to hang out in an underwater world. Just to get into the course I had to pass a swimming test, and I did it (mostly back crawl, mind you, but I passed just the same). However, in very short order I found myself falling way behind the other students in my SCUBA class. The way the course was structured, a student had to master some considerable skin diving skills (just fins, sometimes mask and snorkel) and, with my still-underdeveloped breath control under water, I simply wasn't getting it. Week after week I tried and tried. I began to hate nothing more than the smell of chlorine and the way it churned in my swollen belly after each class. Equal to my inability in the pool, I was also doing horribly in the theory part of the course. It had been years since I had to memorise information I did not really grasp (*a la* every science class I ever took in high school) and complete multiple choice and short answer tests. I ended up failing the theory test and never progressing enough to take the pool test.

During a meeting with my doctoral dissertation advisor, he asked how everything was going and I told him I was failing SCUBA. Some 18 years of formal schooling and half-way through my doctoral degree, I had finally found a course to fail. I had never in my life failed any academic course. Even when I wasn't good at something (gym, science, math), I still pulled out at least a B by virtue of studying extra hard.

And who takes SCUBA, swimming and skating classes during their doctoral degree any way? Also belly dancing, canoeing, backpacking and horseback riding, all new to me, all presenting their own

challenges to me as a learner. Most of the courses were offered pass-fail, with a pass equalling regular attendance. But SCUBA, that was actually a course with a grade and I had FAILED.

I am not a failure. Sure, there are many things for which I possess no talent or inherent skill, but to out-and-out fail? It was not just that I had never failed a course, it was also that I had never failed to achieve something I really put my *mind* to. But this was different, this required my body. My body was the one rebelling and sabotaging my efforts. My mind contributed as well, since the less I could do, the more my thoughts were muddled with negative clouds of can't.

I signed-up for SCUBA again. I tried to treat the situation in the way I had been taught in the academic world: To study more and harder, to research to find a solution. But the second time around, things went from bad to worse. This was when I learned that I have an actual fear of being deep under the water with no air. One of my instructors was puzzled by my particular reaction, telling me that many people discover fear and panic responses when using the SCUBA equipment (that maybe it would malfunction) but I was the opposite: fine whenever I had the equipment, panicky and incompetent whenever I had to do skin diving deep under the water.

One night, when I was practising the skills despite my fear, I became convinced I would die. I flailed to the side of the pool but still couldn't breathe through the incredible weight on my chest. The instructor just shook his head. I had never had a panic attack, and it was horrible. Even so, my main fear was that they would kick me out of the class. I talked to people about it (typical: academic consultation), but they were not helpful. "It's just in your head", they would tell me. "I know that! But how do I get it *out* of my head?", I would wail.

Finding no helpful advice, it was then that I decided that I would simply outlast my fear. My body was my enemy because it was responding to the irrational thoughts in my head. It was true that I

have never been able to conquer anything to do with my body, but I rationalised that this was different. This was not a talent I lacked, but rather a fear I could outlast. My body would not be able to sustain the energy of a panic state forever, I reasoned. I would eventually learn to perform, despite the fear.

That is just what I did. I practised, I studied, I did extra practice, and when I passed the written and skills test I was thrilled – but still not completely confident. So during the following school terms, I went every week to the pool to practise, practise, practise. The open water diver certification trip fell the weekend before my graduation for my doctorate. Graduation I did not attend. If I had, I would certainly not have felt a margin of the sense of accomplishment I felt after completing my three certification dives to earn my open water diver certification. I floated on land.

Today, I still do the things I cannot do, my journey continues. For example, I am living the very interesting experience as a teacher of being a professor to students in their second language *while* I am learning their first language. Their ability in English far surpasses my ability in Spanish, yet many of the issues of language acquisition and practice with a second language are universal. I can sympathise, empathise, and also appreciate and admire their effort to learn in my courses in a language not native to them.

One of the subjects at the heart of the teaching of human communication is perception. I want my students to understand the process of perception, including where and how we often go wrong. I also want them to understand that differences in perception are often the source of conflict, both in our relationships and on a global scale. Our minds – although powerful and full of potential – can work against us, closing down our thinking, leading us to erroneous conclusions that we are then convinced are concrete, being lazy instead of critical, being certain instead of questioning. I share with my students stories of times when my mind has used my

perceptions to convince me that I could not do something, such as full-body push-ups when I was training for my karate lessons. Now when I have a student who feels they cannot do something – give that speech, learn to edit their mistakes in writing, give a presentation in English, change their ways of communicating in relationships – how do I respond? How many times I have felt the same way. How many times I have taken the easy way out, or at least wanted to. Sometimes the best learning hurts, I tell them. How I know this: learning cramps your feet, makes you sick to your stomach, makes you afraid for your life, makes you dread, makes you feel less, makes you feel incompetent, makes you question yourself, undermines your self-confidence. As Brookfield states: "Our experiences as learners are felt at a visceral, emotional level that is much deeper than that of reason" (1995: 31). Learning is a process of perception that requires us to replace many processes of perception already ingrained in our minds and, viscerally, in our bodies. One common process of perception: everything leads me to believe that I cannot do that.

But you must. You must do the thing you think you cannot do. Why? Because we need to be lifelong learners, we *should* be lifelong learners in a real sense, not just as some lofty ideal. And as teachers, we need to be practising what we preach, practising what we teach. We should not be allowed to grow too comfortable with what we teach, for if we do, we are much too far away from the sometimes hurt of learning to legitimately and convincingly request it of our students.

People often assume that, since I have a doctorate, I must be smart and I must be good at things. I always make a point of clearing up that confusion. After all, a doctorate only means that I have developed expertise in *one* area; for every other area and every other kind of learning I could be horribly inept. Just picture me on skates, or getting hit on the head with a volleyball. We should not let our minds become so lazy that as educators we see learners only in one way, instead of as the multifaceted and complicated intricacies most of us

are as human beings. I ask you to also picture me, today, living in the Caribbean and taking every opportunity to SCUBA dive, sharing that underwater world I love, playing around vibrant fish and turtles and rays and sharks and an occasional octopus. I did the thing I thought I could not do, but my list of the impossible goes on. And you?

“We can’t become what we need to be by remaining what we are.” (Oprah Winfrey)

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### About the author

**Dr. MacLennan**, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Puerto Rico, is currently working on two projects: communication about sex in relationships; religion in the communication classroom. Her most recent experience of doing the thing she thought she could not do involves practising the dynamic Brazilian martial art of capoeira. Despite all her anxieties and fears, she fell so much in love with the movements and rhythms of capoeira that she found herself in the best shape of her life. Thus, in the summer of 2007 when she broke her neck in a car accident, she accredited her avoidance of paralysis and speedy recovery to this continuous adult journey of learning.

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## RESEARCH REPORT

### Community-based adult education for the fisherwomen of Rajapalyam fishing village in Tuticorin, southeast coast of India

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*Rajapalyam village is located in the Tuticorin district along the biodiversity rich Gulf of Mannar coast in southeastern India. The people of this village are economically backward and most of the men are engaged in fishing. The fisherwomen of this village are less literate than the men, or illiterate. Adult education has been introduced to the women of this village in order to enhance their literacy level, environmental awareness and livelihood. Within a very short period, the women have improved themselves greatly through learning and are now demonstrating the importance and necessity of education to neighbouring villages.*

## Introduction

Rajapalyam fishing village is geographically located about nine kilometers north of Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, India and along the biodiversity rich Gulf of Mannar coast. The Gulf of Mannar is the first Marine Biosphere Reserve in India, declared in 1989 by the Government of India. The village has a two-kilometre coastline where the fishery-related activities are carried out. One of the 21 islands in the Gulf of Mannar, named Vaan, is located about six kilometres from this village and abounds with a wide variety of flora and fauna including coral reefs and seagrasses. The fishermen of this village are involved in fishing around the Vaan island area. A few years ago, fishermen were involved in coral mining in addition to fishing because of low literacy and lack of awareness. However, after the 2004 tsunami, the villagers have realised the importance of island and coral reefs and hence the local village administration has banned coral mining and the fisherfolk have now completely stopped that (now illegal) practice.

Education plays a lead role in enhancing the involvement of community and its livelihood, and also helps in conserving the natural resources for sustainable utilization. It is therefore important that adult education has been introduced in this village in order to build capacity among the fisherwomen to enhance their life and knowledge. Adult education has been important also in other parts of the world as a contributor to national development in southern Africa (Oduaran & Okukpon 2005), for healthy participative democracy in Scotland (Hammond 2006), and in its influence on education and training in Ireland (Morrissey & McNamara 2004). However, the aim of introducing adult education in Rajapalyam village is basic in terms of enhancing literacy and livelihood.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- collect information about the village and villagers by conducting interviews among village leaders, representatives of Self-Help Group women and fishermen,
- understand the role of women in Self-Help Groups, and
- introduce adult education to the women.

## Profile of the village and villagers

The total area of the village is about ten acres, of which two acres are assigned as a playground and 0.63 acres for a church. Most of the houses are located one kilometre from the seashore in accordance with the Coastal Zone Regulation of the Government of India. Of the total population, 95% are Christians and five percent are Hindus. All the Christians are Roman Catholics and they have constructed one church in the village. The Christian community is against the construction of a Hindu temple in the village. Sundays are local holidays in this village and no one ventures out for fishing. The prime shortcomings of the village are the absence of a school and a primary health centre.

The entire village has electricity facilities and about 99% of the houses have electricity connections. The remaining one percent, the very low income group, has no electricity connection as they cannot afford it. Rajapalyam is connected by a good tar road and 11 minibuses are operating via this village to connect with the Tuticorin town. There is no proper sewage system and only five percent of the village houses have toilet facilities. The majority of the villagers use the open and bushy areas surrounding the village for their toiletry needs. Though public lavatories exist, very few villagers use them.

The total population and education details are presented in Table 1. The population of the village is 799, of whom 435 are women. Fisherwomen constitute about 55% of the total population. Most of the people in this village are educated up to elementary school level and comparatively few villagers are uneducated. Very few members

of the village are educated to college level. Both the elementary level educated and the uneducated people do not know how to affix their signature, and instead, use thumb impression. The men are involved in different types of occupations such as fishing, seafood vending, small-scale business and manual work to earn their livelihood. Most of the women in this village are housewives and a very few women are engaged in selling fresh and dried fish in the village and the neighboring villages.

*Table 1: Population and education level of people of Rajapalayam fishing village*

No. of families	Total population	No. of males	No. of females	No. educated to school level	No. educated to college level	No. uneducated
175	799	364	435	700	85	14

In the total population, 700 are educated to school level, 85 educated to college level and 14 are uneducated, and this is in approximately equal ratio for women and men. The women educated at school level and the uneducated women are the ones involved in the activities of the Self-Help Groups.

### **Role of women in Self-Help Groups**

All the fisherwomen of this village are members of the Self-Help Groups and these groups are under the control of the Tuticorin Multipurpose Social Service Society run by the Roman Catholic Diocese. The Bishop of the Tuticorin District is the president and he is assisted by several members (Patterson 2003). There are seven of these groups in the village and each has 20 members. Their main role is to promote small savings and to help in availing government

loans from banks at low interest rates in proportion to their savings. This finance is utilised for their monetary needs arising out of health care, family functions, children's education and the like. The Self-Help Group presidents collect the loans from the banks and divide the money among the group members.

### **Involvement of the women in adult education**

Through cooperation funded by SPIDER, Sweden, involving information and communication technology among the Suganthi Devadason Marine Research Institute (SDMRI), the Coastal Ocean Research and Development in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO), and the East Africa and Nyköping's Folkhögskola School in Sweden, adult education has been introduced in this village. Initially, the staff of SDMRI was trained in adult education by the staff of Nyköping's Folkhögskola. Based on this training, two women coordinators from Rajapalayam fishing village were selected by SDMRI and delivered training in adult education in their local language. After the training, SDMRI provided basic education materials such as alphabet books, blackboards, slates, chalk pieces, papers and pencils to the village coordinators and encouraged them to start adult education in their village. Initially 40 women attended the adult education program, and after witnessing the progress, more women (n=64) from that village and also from the nearby small village (Nehru colony) also started attending classes. The participants are between 20 and 60 years of age. Of these 64 women, 16 are uneducated and the rest have been educated only to elementary level.

Since all women are engaged in different types of work until noon-time, the village coordinators conduct the classes daily between 2pm and 6pm. The coordinators initially taught the English alphabet to the low literate women and the alphabet of their mother tongue (Tamil) to the uneducated women. Now 24 women are learning English. The women are trained to write their own names and affix

their signatures by writing their own names. After training them to write their names, they are taught to read and write small words. Once the women members are trained in words, the coordinators teach them how to read and write sentences. They are regularly given tests in writing sentences and filling in blanks in sentences. Once the women have learnt small words, they are given training in reading and writing their village names so they can read the destination name boards on local buses, thereby enabling them to travel alone without others' help. They are also given environmental education. Due to the dedication and involvement of the participants and the hard work of the coordinators, adult education is achieving success in this village within a relatively short period. Women who previously affixed their signature using their thumb impression are now writing their names for signatures.

### Salient outcomes

The main outcomes arising from this project are the following.

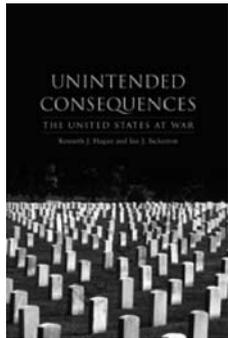
- Women have learned to affix their signature by writing their names instead of thumb impression.
- Women who knew how to write their names in Tamil have learned also to write them in English.
- Women have learned to read bus boards and have started to travel alone.
- Women have learned simple mathematical calculations through adult education.
- Women have learned to write their family members' names.
- The fisherwomen are now using their learned skills to guide their children and grandchildren in their education.
- Rajapalayam village is now demonstrating to its neighbouring villages the importance of adult education.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are thankful to SPIDER, Sweden, for financial support for this work. The authors are also thankful to the village administration for providing information and to the Self-Help Group women for their dedication and involvement in the adult education program.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Unintended consequences: the United States at war**

Kenneth J. Hagan and Ian J Bickerton  
London: Reaktion Books, 2007  
ISBN: 978-1-86189-310-9; 220 pages

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This book examines US wars from the American Revolution to the current Iraq conflict. The book is based on a central assumption that diplomacy is preferable to war and war always leads to unanticipated outcomes. It is a relatively slender volume of just over 200 pages. There are comprehensive notes and a useful bibliography.

Each of the ten chapters offers a synopsis of the war in question, then a more detailed overview of the major events of each war and finally an analysis of the outcomes and unintended consequences. Thus the volume commences with the American War of Independence (captioned as The First Major War) and then continues with The Second War against Britain and those against the Mexicans, the Spanish as well as The Civil War. The twentieth century is represented

with the two World Wars and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq.

This is a most interesting and engaging volume if for no other reason than its essential simplicity and the quality of writing. Come to think of it, I suppose this is what makes interesting history. Have a relatively simple framework and apply it consistently to particular characteristics of the behaviour of groups, tribes, nation states and so on. Make sure the scholarship is thorough and the focus has a desirable topical relevance.

Now for a non-scholarly assessment by a septuagenarian West Wing junkie. It's good stuff, read it, but don't take it too seriously.

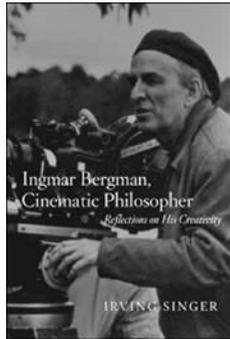
Why?

I and obviously the authors know history is more complex than this. We know there are unintended consequences with all we do. So we cannot presume diplomacy instead of taking up arms will ultimately bypass the possibility of violence. Nor can we presume our moral stances will be shared and confirmed by others with different interests or that politics should be inherently non-violent.

But there is a mea culpa. It is worth suspending disbelief and imagining a better world and a better way of dealing with our competing interests. This volume does this in spades. But as an inveterate cynic I suspect the authors wrote with a formula to stir our scepticism about the American Imperium and reinforce all we ever thought about those evil and stupid Yanks. I don't find this particularly satisfying apart from the confirmation that we are all bastards and with power and advantage we are bigger bastards.

In summary, the book is clever but too clever. It's feel-good popular history? But why not?

**Paul Gunning**  
**Adelaide, South Australia**



## BOOK REVIEW

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### Ingmar Bergman, cinematic philosopher: reflections on his creativity

Irving Singer

Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007

Hardcover; ISBN: 978-0-262-19563-8; 240 pages; list price: \$26.95

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The late Ingmar Bergman, who died in July 2007, is considered by many to be one of the greatest movie directors of all time. A great deal has been written on Bergman's life and art. I need to confess that I am no expert in Bergman's work having seen just two of his most well known pieces: *The Virgin Spring* (1960) and *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

Bergman's importance for cinema cannot be overestimated. He was a three-time Oscar winner for best foreign film and has been described by Jason Ankeny as one who

... radically altered the nature and meaning of the motion picture form, transfiguring a medium long devoted to spectacle into an art capable of profoundly personal meditations into the myriad struggles facing the psyche and the soul. By focusing

on the exploration of self with unparalleled intensity, Bergman brought to the screen a new sense of emotional intimacy, fusing the concepts behind Freudian psychotherapy with a dreamlike sensibility founded on visual metaphors, flashbacks, and extreme close-ups to create a revelatory cinematic world unlike any before it. (All Movie Guide)

It is unsurprising, then, that a great deal has been written about Bergman and the meaning of his work. Irving Singer has added to this wealth of material with his book *Ingmar Bergman, cinematic philosopher*. In it, Singer explores two aspects of Bergman's creativity: its meaningfulness and its technical expertise. In the preface, Singer points out the irony of his analysis given that Bergman has said that 'the creativity in his directing of film or theater relies mainly upon his momentary intuitions rather than any fixed or premeditated reasoning.' Despite that, Singer believes that investigating Bergman's work from a philosopher's perspective is highly worthwhile.

Singer, who is a professor of philosophy at MIT, has authored a number of books on the philosophy of film including *Three philosophical filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, and Renoir*. Hitchcock and Welles appear in this latest book by Singer as points of comparison for the work of Bergman.

After some general observations in the first chapter, Singer divides his analysis into three chapters. The first explores the concepts of magic, myth and the return to childhood – themes that, for Singer, pervade Bergman's films. Singer not only explores the content of the films but the techniques of film-making used by Bergman and which carry with them the meaning portrayed in the content. For example, Singer argues that the effects the viewer sees as a result of the 'flickering images on a screen or monitor' are mythical in themselves. So film, in its technical aspects, is magical and mythical even as it conveys mythology that is culturally significant.

In his second chapter, Singer turns to ‘religious quandaries and the nature of love’. And finally, in the third chapter, the focus centres on the ‘ambiguities of the human condition’. Just from the titles of the chapters alone, we can see the profundity of material explored in Bergman’s films (and other forms such as theatre which the author also draws upon) – life, death, love, existence, religion. Singer’s discussion is wide-ranging and attempts to provide a coherent summary of what Bergman’s philosophical perspectives on the world and the human experience were, despite the multiple possible readings of the highly metaphorical material produced by Bergman.

In his epilogue, Singer compares the work of Einstein and Bergman. Singer quotes Einstein stating that ‘the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science’. For Singer, neither Einstein nor Bergman explains what the ‘mysterious’ means or how the mysterious is transformed into art and science. Instead, the work of people like Einstein and Bergman should be seen as inspirational rather than answering all the big questions.

Understanding mystery and justifying the link between mystery, art and science is, for Singer, the work of philosophers and theologians (and, one assumes, the rest of us). This inspiration provocation, ‘[a]bove all, ... may induce us to undertake what lies beyond the tentative speculations of these two great men [Einstein and Bergman], creative and admirable as they were despite their limitations. Where such needed undertakings will lead us, if anywhere, remains unforeseeable.’

So, in essence, the explorations of Singer in this small volume are part of the fascinating journey of grappling with the big questions that have inspired him as he has immersed himself in the work of Bergman.

Singer’s book is, at times, a intriguing series of observations and thoughts on Bergman’s life and work. But, for me, it depended a lot

on whether I was reading an analysis of one of the films I had seen or not. When Singer was describing scenes from *The Virgin Spring* or *The Seventh Seal*, his ideas had an immediacy that the rest of it did not. I could imagine the scenes he was referring to and appreciated his insights. This is probably an obvious observation. But it is important because Singer’s knowledge of Bergman’s work is so vast. If a reader has not seen any of Bergman’s movies, it would be worth doing so before reading the book. On the other hand, even though I have not seen all of Bergman’s work, Singer has inspired me to pursue more – there is clearly a depth and richness to Bergman’s cinematic creations that I have missed on first viewing and much more to be gleaned from those I haven’t yet seen.

Singer’s book is probably going to be most valuable to an individual who wishes to make a focused study of Bergman’s work – be they professional or layperson. The nature of Bergman’s movie-making demands some hard work on the part of the viewer. And Singer’s book presents a similar challenge. It’s a philosophical quest to understand an artist who has, in many respects, explored the meaning of his life on the screen. It will not only provide the reader with insights into the work of a very important artist, but sensitise us to the deep questions raised in all good art.

**Steve Parker**  
**Flinders University, South Australia**



## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Insights from research and practice: a handbook for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL practitioners**

Margaret Herrington and Alex Kendall (eds.)

Corporate Author: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education  
(England and Wales) (NIACE)  
Leicester, United Kingdom: NIACE, 2005

ISBN: 1 86201 202 4 (pbk); xxviii, 663 pp.; paperback: £28.95, US\$54  
ISBN: 1 86201 244 X (hbk); xxviii, 663 pp.; hard Cover: £74.95, US\$137  
Available for purchase via [http://www.voced.edu.au/td/tnc\\_82.484](http://www.voced.edu.au/td/tnc_82.484)

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The editors are from the University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom, and are currently engaged in delivering new teacher training courses in literacy and ESOL. Their thinking is located within a 'postmodern, critical thinking tradition which views knowledge as always contingent in relation to how and by whom it is generated' (p.xviii). Therefore, they use a 'multinarrative framework in relation to literacy and assume that any knowledge generation must involve gathering data from and by students, tutors and researchers' (p.xviii).

In this 650-odd page volume, there are some eighty contributors and these authors are British and overseas researchers, practitioners and students who have published their ideas between 1986 and 2004 in the journal of the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) network, a British national organisation that focuses on the role of literacy in adult life, and is an independent network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in adult basic education. It provides a forum in which practitioners have the space and freedom to describe what they do in practice (p.xvi). The aim of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales) (NIACE), a non-governmental organisation, is to increase the number of adults engaged in both formal and informal learning in England and Wales, and, for those people who are under-represented under current arrangements, to improve their opportunities and to increase their access to learning opportunities.

With rapid and significant changes in the area occurring throughout England and Wales, this publication aims to link past experience directly to the present policy context. Thus the purpose of the book is to provide an overview of the central political, philosophical and pedagogical issues relating to adult literacy. The political dimensions are highly charged, being bound up with the UK government's view that literacy levels are bound up with overall economic productivity. In addition, practitioners need to draw from the profession's accumulated knowledge and skills. Furthermore, there are new developments in pedagogy from which new practitioners are able to draw.

The publication is divided into three parts: first, 'Building knowledge and enhancing expertise through research in/ and practice'; second, 'Relevant examples from the RaPAL collection'; and third, 'Learning about dyslexia through research and practice'. The largest section of some five hundred pages is the second, covering an overview of the issues ('Perspectives'), and sections on policy, practitioner roles

and identity, literacy, numeracy and ESOL, management issues, curriculum content and process, assessment and accreditation, issues relating to numeracy, ESOL, dyslexia, disability, literacy (international, family, workplace and prisons), as well as a section on literacy and gender.

For Australian readers, the publication provides a glimpse of the British educational scene, which may be shaped by a variety of political and ideological influences, Britain being part of the European Common Market (unlike the relative geographic isolation of Australia). The content has such a wide range (encompassing prisons, the deaf and aphasia, for example) and diversity that makes it difficult for any one reviewer/ practitioner to assess or critique. On the positive side, the relative brevity of the articles makes for easy access by the reader. There is an interview with Paolo Friere, and a significant paper by Gunther Kress on the futures of literacy. Margaret Herrington edited the final section on dyslexia research and practice. Barbara Hatley-Broad provides a very relevant article on 'ESOL and sport', and the strategies she applies in her situation may help young males to get involved in learning literacy and numeracy. Brookfield's paper on 'Myths and realities in adult education' would certainly provoke a debate on significant issues.

With such a large number of contributions to this volume, it is difficult to generalize about the overall quality of the publication. But it does provide a stimulating insight into the British scene and, most importantly, is an example of how practitioners can express their experiential insights, thus encouraging debate and intercommunication between busy teachers, researchers and, hopefully, policy-makers. Whether or not it is relevant to the Australian scene can only be gauged by examining the eighty or so papers individually, and assessing their usefulness to the relevant area of teaching practice. However, the volume does provide an

excellent model of how educational issues can be opened up for discussion and debate.

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