

4 The Mothership: Exploring the anatomy of one New Zealand Men's Shed

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4.1 Background

The Kiwi Men's Shed (a pseudonym) on the South Island of New Zealand was the only Men's Shed in New Zealand visited by the "Getting of Wisdom" older learning research conference delegates, including the authors and Sabina Jelenc Krašovec. However, a small number of delegates, including Sabina, visited 12 other Men's Sheds in Victoria, Australia on a pre-conference Men's Shed tour. Another chapter in this book (see Rawiński & Golding, chapter 5) is based on field research undertaken at two of the Sheds: in Beechworth, Victoria (where Rawiński and Jelenc Krašovec spent two days independently visiting the Shed), and also from Sebastopol Men's Shed prior to visiting the Kiwi Shed in New Zealand.

The Kiwi Men's Shed was one of 121 Men's Sheds open across New Zealand as of 2021, out of a global total of 2,750 open in seven main countries (Golding, 2021). Men's Sheds have been comprehensively studied by the authors since 2007 as places for powerful and transformative informal learning by older men (Golding et al., 2007). A comprehensive analysis of the genesis, nature and international spread of the Men's Shed Movement was undertaken by Golding (2015). The New Zealand version is of particular interest as it was "grassroots", bottom-up and developed independently thousands of kilometres from those it was modelled on. We wanted to see what was distinctive and perhaps subtly different about a New Zealand Men's Shed.

Unlike in Australia, the UK and Ireland (which collectively have around 90% of all Men's Sheds open globally in 2021), "MENZSHEDS", as they tend to be called in New Zealand, have not yet received the same attention of national government policy and funding or researchers. Not only are the Sheds largely self-supporting, but are also almost all run by volunteers. Similarly, the peak national body, MENZSHED NZ, operates on an entirely voluntary basis with no government funding. That Men's Sheds have over the 12 years since 2009 spread to over 100 communities in all corners of this southwest Pacific nation, with minimal government assistance, is all the more remarkable.

The Kiwi Men's Shed was introduced as an "innovative" New Zealand Men's Shed case study in Golding (2015, pp. 326–239). It was New Zealand's first,

purpose-built, community Men's Shed, officially opened in June 2009. In many ways it has become something of a template and beacon for Men's Sheds in New Zealand, now affectionately called "The Mothership" by "sheddiess", as the New Zealand participants call themselves (elsewhere, they call themselves "shedders").

The conference delegates in 2017 were simply astounded by what was going on in the Shed when they visited together. Every corner had someone doing something remarkable. There were coffins lovingly crafted for terminally ill men or their partners. There were areas for all manner of specialist woodwork and metalcraft. People were woodturning, making musical instruments and toys, and we were invited to share the Shed-baked scones, jam and cream.

Fast forward to 2021, and at the time of our interviews for this chapter the Shed coordinator, "Mike" (a pseudonym), had provided an update about the Kiwi Shed "Mothership" for a case study included in Golding (2021). He reported that the Shed membership remained stable at around 150 men, and that the interests of members had diversified, including more "high tech" apparatus for the men to explore, which required additional shed space. In 2020 COVID-19 meant the Shed closed for eight weeks. As Mike put it, "That was very hard on the blokes, particularly those who live alone, taking away their sanctuary." Community reach had increased to include more than 135 local clubs, groups and organisations that benefited from the role the Men's Shed plays, leading to their new and very apt slogan for the Kiwi Men's Shed: "In the Community, For the Community".

When we looked for a chapter related to Sabina Jelenc Krašovec's passionate research interest in the power and value of informal learning for older men, exemplified by her paper with others about older men's learning in Slovenia (Jelenc Krašovec et al., 2014), a closer look at the Kiwi Shed seemed a natural choice. We wondered what it was about this particular Shed whose "DNA" had spread so widely in New Zealand for it to be referred to as "the Mothership". But we needed to collect data and identify a theoretical perspective to underpin our initial approach and to frame our interview questions. Given COVID-19, the only data collection tool open to us was online interviews via Zoom.

4.2 Theoretical Perspective

Our initial thoughts for an organising principle for investigating the Kiwi "Shed DNA" first turned to the controversial field of *sociobiology*, a field of biology pioneered by Wilson (1975). It aims to examine and explain social behaviour in terms of evolution. An infectious, effective and evolving social movement might

be seen as something analogous to a virus (ideally, much more positive than the COVID-19 virus). A virus self-replicates, mutating along the way depending on the different environmental conditions and host organism. Certainly, all Sheds are different, depending on the vision and intentions of the “sheddies”, as well the embedding community. Using this analogy, some common “Shed DNA” from an existing Shed might analogously be transferred to a new Shed.

Thus, in January 2021 our initial methodological approach presupposed that all Sheds, being grassroots, are different, might share (and pass on) some of the same original, essential “Men’s Shed DNA” from the prototypical first Men’s Shed envisioned by the late Dick McGowan and opened in 1998 in Tongala, Australia, as “[s]omewhere to go, something to do, someone to talk to” (McGowan, 1998, cited in Golding, 2015, p. 124).

Using this analogy, Sheds can perhaps be seen as individual organisms, perhaps “species” of the same Shed “genus”, related in a common family or Movement. As with most organisations, they will have a birth, life and eventual demise over time not unlike an organism. Perhaps it was the Shed’s physical infrastructure and internal operating systems which made it so successful from its birth?

We tracked down a report written more than a decade ago (Styles, 2010) which certainly suggested the above. It noted that the Kiwi Men’s Shed “offers a social service that is not mirrored by any other facility or organisation in this community” (p. 4). But if it was something of a first in New Zealand, where did it get its inspiration from? We found on the same page in Styles (2010, p. 4) the smoking gun. “Paul May” (pseudonym) is credited with having the “vision to establish the venture”. Digging a little deeper, Barry Golding recalled that Paul visited Australia and participated in the first ever national Men’s Shed Conference in Manly, Sydney in 2007, a memorable event both the authors participated in. Over several days Paul “rubbed shoulders” with shedders from many parts of Australia. Some of the Shed DNA clearly rubbed off, and he clearly came back informed and inspired.

The 2007 Australian Conference covered critically important operational Shed matters including governance, funding, insurance, health and safety, operating rules and procedures, precisely the same items listed by Styles (2010) as being “vital component of the success of the [Kiwi] Men’s Shed” (p. 4).

We got to thinking that these systems in Sheds might be perhaps analogous to systems operating in an ecosystem, a place in the community where diverse men work together to form a bubble of life, through which energy and ideas flow. Certainly,

ecosystem theory has also been used as a metaphor in business organisations (Pari-sot, 2013). Extending on this analogy, perhaps each Shed might be analogous to a *biome*, a collection of men that have common characteristics for the environment they exist in. They are distinct human communities that have formed in response to a shared interest and need at a particular time in life.

But we sensed there was more than this. What we felt, experienced as visitors and saw in the sheddies was more akin to joy, perhaps what Illich (1973) called conviviality, the quality of being lively and friendly. Golding (2014b) used theoretical insights from Illich (1973) and Freire (1970, 1985) as well as *Men Learning through Life* (Golding et al., 2014) to examine this evident Shed conviviality, which included powerful insights from Sabina Jelenc Krašovec’s contributions in *Older Men Learning in the Community: European snapshots* (Radovan & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). Formosa, Fragoso and Jelenc Krašovec (2014) noted that:

most lifelong programmes tend to operate along ‘schooling’ lines, embedded firmly in traditional pedagogies [...] alien to older men, who prefer learning styles that promote a hands-on and practical approach, that take place in ‘men-only’ settings that involve peer mentoring, and that enable them to perform real tasks that result in tangible and transferable benefits (Golding et al., 2009). (p. 19)

Golding (2014a) concluded that:

the radical insights initiated by men themselves [in Men’s Sheds] through their everyday social and community practice now call for similarly radical policy responses in more conventional adult education places and spaces [...] The closer one gets to community [...] the more important and valuable informal, social and convivial learning becomes. (p. 23)

We have ourselves recently returned to some of these themes in Foley and Golding (2021) and Golding (2014b), where we observe that because of the unique, powerful, transformative and salutogenic (health-promoting) ways in which informal learning takes place “shoulder to shoulder” in these communities of men’s practice in Men’s Sheds, it is time to consider a new pedagogy (theory and practice of learning) that Golding (2014a) called *shedagogy*.

Golding’s (2014a) paper leveraged off Freire’s (1970, cited in Schugurensky, 2011) call in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to identify new “forms of critical practice that interrogate, destabilize, and disorganize dominant power/knowledge relations, and at the same time, develop alternative pedagogies” (p. 198). Golding (2014a)

defined the social, local and situated informal learning that was going on in Sheds as “shedagogy”, a distinctive, new way of acknowledging, describing and addressing the way some men prefer to learn informally in shed-like spaces mainly with other men. In that paper, Golding (2014a) concluded that:

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

All of the above is consistent with the way we designed the study. We envisaged that we would study the Kiwi Men’s Shed as an organism, anatomically, and that if we asked the shedders to break the Shed into its component parts, roles and functions, they would lead us via their responses to the systems and shedagogies that made the Shed function.

The title for our Research Ethics application and the working title for this book chapter was thus “The Anatomy of One New Zealand Men’s Shed”, emphasising our broad but very specific quest, to identify and separate the component parts of one Men’s Shed. In essence we perceived that the Shed and its participants might be akin to an organism with interdependent parts that work together to provide impactful experiences for its participants, their families and communities.

4.3 Method

The choice of interviewees was guided by the advice of Mike, the Coordinator of the Shed who acted as a liaison between the researchers, the potential interviewees and the Men’s Shed, and was also interviewed. The interviews were conducted via Zoom over two days in February 2021 by both the chapter authors. The interview questions explored the men’s participation and experiences of the Shed, what their families, other shedders and communities get from them participating in the Shed, and their view of the parts, roles and functions of the Shed. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants and Men’s Shed involved in the study.

Table 1 summarises characteristics of the six interviewee participants, ranging in age from 64 to 93.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Shed Interview Participants

| Sheddie Details | Roger | Jim | Mark | Thomas | James | Mike |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|---|----------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Age | 74 | 70 | 64 | 93 | 84 | 71 |
| Previous work | Marketing executive | Retired farmer | Commercial/ industrial air conditioning | Medical doctor | Power board controller | Men's Shed coordinator |
| Years involved in the Shed | 8 | - | 4 | 3 | 9.5 | 11 |

We adopted an approach based on thematic analysis which involved searching across the data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, (2006) a theme is a “patterned response or meaning derived from the data that informs the research question” (p. 82).

The thematic analysis process was employed consisting of six steps: (a) familiarising ourselves with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes (e), defining and naming themes (f) and producing the report/manuscript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was sorted manually, which included “a process of sorting and defining the transcripts and defining and sorting of collected data [...] applicable to the research” (Glesne, 2006, p. 21). The sorting process consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts identifying reoccurring words, ideas, patterns and themes generated from the data. The transcripts were read and reread, and themes were highlighted. Within each transcript, concepts and ideas emerged through re-occurring words, messages and meanings. Corresponding codes were used to identify themes, and from this three categories in the data were identified, each with corresponding themes.

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Federation University Australia, and included ethical protocols to ensure informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and privacy.

4.4 Findings

As indicated above, common themes – which refer to important points in the study relating to participants’ perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about participation in the Kiwi Shed – were identified in the data (Ely et al., 1997). These themes were categorised into three sections, which were:

- Socialisation and companionship
- Learning new skills
- Shed coordination.

4.4.1 Socialisation and Companionship

Having the opportunity to meet new people and develop friendships was mentioned by all the participants interviewed. Mark, a 64-year-old ex-tradesman, explained that his wife eventually convinced him that going to the Shed might be a good idea. Once he decided, he mentioned that even though he “didn’t know anyone from a bar of soap”, he was made to feel very welcome from the minute he stepped into the Shed.

Friendship was particularly important for Mark. He informed us that “one of the reasons the Shed works for me is because it’s giving me new friendships”. Similarly for Roger, once he had made up his mind to go to the Shed, he reported that he had “made a lot of new friends, and I’ve met a lot of people that I would never have met without being part of the Shed”. Feeling a part of the Shed and being accepted was an important aspect of the Shed for Roger, who mentioned that it involved a diverse range of men who were all welcomed and made to feel comfortable.

For Thomas, 93 years old at the time of the interview, friendship and companionship was the main reason he described for participating: “I come to socialise, that’s on Thursday morning and most of the old codgers come along, we have morning tea and that to me is my main involvement, I don’t have anything else to do really. I belong to the writing group, and I socialise.” Thomas described how he had found the Shed three years prior and that despite enjoying his own company he enjoyed the Shed and explained that “when I first joined the Shed, when it first opened, the first week I went home to my wife and told her that I met 20 new friends in a week, these are guys I hadn’t known before, which is unusual.” The companionship of the Shed was the key motivation for Thomas. “You’ve got people of your own age that you can talk to and will listen to you. There is equality here, there’s no sort of hierarchy. I did enjoy the companionship and the sharing of ideas and the discussion and that sort of thing.”

Similarly for Jim, an ex-farmer originally from the South Island, companionship was one of the main reasons for him attending the Shed. “Companionship and meeting blokes, having somewhere to go to and have a communal meeting is the recreation side of it, you can come and do things.”

4.4.2 Learning new skills

Roger, a retired marketing executive, also agreed companionship was important, but linked it to working alongside the men and learning new skills together:

Learning new skills is what [...] I sign up for and meeting new people, that's the key factor of why I'm here. It's sort of become part of me and I've become part of it, hardly a day goes by without me coming in having a cup of coffee, telling a few lies to the guys, and leaving.

Indeed, for Roger the learning side of the Shed experience was critically important. He described how many of the men participating in the Shed shared their knowledge with others and that this allowed him to learn all sorts of new skills that he wouldn't have learnt otherwise. "It allows me to walk around and see and learn new skills. I can walk around [...] and see who's doing what awesome project. There are very skilful people here who share their knowledge."

When asked about the main functions of the Shed, James, an 84-year-old, described meeting people, doing projects and being "proud" of the Shed as important to him. James related at length that when he first started going to the Shed he was involved with making the outside pizza oven. Not being as able-bodied now as he once was, he explained that he spends more time playing cards and having a cup of coffee with the other men. Being proud of his achievements and the achievements of the other men came out as important to him throughout the interview.

4.4.3 Coordination

When asked about how the Shed was run, Jim stated very clearly that in his view it was Mike, the coordinator of the Shed, who "plays an important part of the work of the Men's Shed movement here in New Zealand: this place wouldn't function as it does without him."

According to Jim, Mike is a:

Great controller [...] control is a strong word, I don't mean it in a pejorative way, no he does control what goes on almost beyond where some of the more conservative of us – and I'm just about one of those – say 'Back off, Mike I don't want to be controlled not anymore', and he does control, and he coordinates it.

Jim described how Mike, unlike some other coordinators:

is paid to be there and coordinate the Shed, so in [Mike's] view the Shed is run properly not like others where they just stumble about,

really there's no structure, we're trying to resuscitate a neighbouring Shed at the moment because it's exactly that, there is no structure, there is no control and therefore there's no plan so it's not functioning. Mike's job description is he organises the funding as well, so he not only runs the show, but he organised how he gets paid and how the shed survives financially. He does that very well, he's well connected he understands it and he's invaluable to us.

When asked about the coordination of the Shed, Mark also had strong and supportive views about Mike the coordinator, noting that

I couldn't see the Shed operating in the same way. He's absolutely passionate and it rubs off on you [...] In my opinion we have rules and regulations for everybody to be safe and to create lovely projects for the community [...] He does the job exceedingly well because he communicates and he's on top of this game [...] I have the utmost respect for him.

Roger described the coordinator as "the person that makes things happen". He also described Mike making the Shed "a happy and pleasant place to be involved with, he resolves conflicts quite well, unassumingly, he just gets on with doing things, he covers the parts and functions, really, he covers that area for me."

When asked about coordinating the Kiwi Men's Shed, Mike described his role as comprising a number of elements. These included the occupational health and safety requirements of the Shed, the legal requirements and their implications, which for Mike needed to be met in order for the Shed to operate. For Mike, the paid role was a good model because the functioning and safety of the Shed was clearly his responsibility and not left to volunteers. Mike was obviously a passionate advocate for the Shed and invested in its success. He described himself as having

dedicated myself to the Men's Shed because I'm so passionate about it, that's what Men Sheds are, what they do, for blokes. I got divorced about six years ago so the last few years I've just got more and more involved. So while I'm employed from 8am till 12 noon Monday to Friday, I carry on in a voluntary capacity beyond that.

4.4.4 Summary of findings

When examining the findings, it's unsurprising that common themes such as socialisation, companionship and learning new skills emerged from the interview data. Many previous studies that have highlighted the social benefits and health

outcomes for men who participate in Sheds (Brown et al., 2008; Flood & Blair, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018), as well as the importance of social connections inherent in Shed activities (Adams et al., 2011). The value of learning beyond paid work has also been well recognised in the context of Men's Sheds (Carragher & Golding, 2016; Golding et al., 2014), and more recently the recognition of community learning and culturally sensitive learning practices (Cavanagh et al., 2016). For the men interviewed in the Kiwi Shed, the coordinator was critical in creating an environment that enabled the participants to feel safe and happy, based on the men's respect for Mike as coordinator and through the passion he had for the Shed.

4.5 Discussion

We returned to Styles (2010) to see whether Mike's role as coordinator stretching back over a decade ago was relevant to the men who were participating in the Kiwi Shed. There we found that "Mike's [...] name has been mentioned countless times as pivotal to the success of the venture" (p. 4). When we turned to the broader international Men's Shed literature, we found wider confirmation of the importance of the coordinator. Milligan et al. (2015) also noted the important role of the coordinator, particularly in supporting those men with "higher-end support needs" (p.143). In a comprehensive literature search by Milligan et al. (2016) of research considering age-related and male-orientated organisations internationally (N=77), the authors identified key elements of successful interventions, including local support, accessibility to a range of activities and skilled coordination, all which were important to getting men involved. The Kiwi Shed certainly ticked all these boxes.

McGeechan et al.'s (2016) findings also confirmed other research that highlights the importance of the role of the coordinator (Golding et al., 2007) to the success of the Shed. In this earlier study the shedders praised the coordinators, who they felt were "always there for them" (p. e253). Many men reported that they could "talk to their coordinator about anything, and they would always be on hand if they needed support" (p. e253). A large study undertaken in the UK by Fisher et al. (2018) formed part of an independent, external evaluation of the Age UK Cheshire Men's Sheds project, and one of its important findings was that coordinators are central to the success of the Shed.

4.6 Conclusion

We conclude that the ethos and governance model of the Australian Men's Shed was most likely faithfully and accurately transferred to this prototypical New Zealand Men's Shed via Paul May by means of his immersion in the 2007 Australian Men's Shed Conference. On top of all else, the ethos has continued by virtue of Mike's decade-plus commitment to the Kiwi Shed, and his coordination role remains pivotal to 2021. Arguably, Mike has created a Shed ethos that is an enabling ecosystem for the New Zealand sheddies who spoke to us.

We consider the Shed ethos as akin to DNA or a virus, replicated or transmitted very effectively by birth and through contact, keeping some of the original DNA intact. Other elements of the Shed ethos have, somewhat like a virus, mutated to "fit" well into its new context and been passed on to other Sheds.

Unsurprisingly, "Shed Crawls" to multiple Sheds in one day have proved particularly effective in similarly transmitting the "Shed DNA" to conference visitors. By bringing the visitors into the Shed, Sabina Jelenc Krašovec and Malgosia Rawiński, as visiting Europeans, were able to become immersed in informal conversations in with the shedders "on their patch", which is completely different and more enlightening than bringing the shedder or a Shed "expert" to the conference to present a talk and slides.

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