

Older Rural Men - Learning for Change

Paper prepared for Adult Learning Australia Conference 27-30 November 2003

Communities of Learning: Communities of Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of non-formal and peer based learning and support programs in linking older rural males to a community of support as they negotiate life changes. It explores two learning initiatives in Northern New South Wales that have grown out of applied research undertaken by the Institute for Rural Futures at the University of New England. The *Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper* program was undertaken as a pilot program during research on Older Farmers and Retirement. *Mature Men Matter* is a project still in progress focused on the role of peer learning and support in improving well-being and wellness for rural men both as individuals and at a community level.

Introduction

This paper explores two learning initiatives in Northern New South Wales that have grown out of applied research undertaken by the Institute for Rural Futures at the University of New England. It focuses, in particular on rural men. In this paper the term rural men is used to refer to men who are (or were previously) actively involved in farming and / or residents of small urban centers (less than 10,000 people) and surrounding rural hinterlands.

Volunteer Farm Retirement Helpers was a peer program piloted as a component of a research project *Older Farmers and Retirement* undertaken with support from the Rural Industries and Development Corporation. In late 2001 a group of retired and semi-retired farm men and women from northern NSW were recruited and trained for a peer support program which had the goal of assisting people in farming to plan for the transition into retirement and of demystifying the third age.

Mature Men Matter is a project (in progress) which developed out of a consultation undertaken in North West NSW by the Institute for Rural Futures in November 2001 for NSW Committee on Ageing (now NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing) on older men's health and well-being. The initial consultation workshop used video-conference to link 47 older men across four sites in the New England North West area of NSW, with experts on men's health and learning based in Sydney and Canberra.

Following a regional workshop co-ordinated by the Institute for Rural Futures in November 2002 with support from the NSW Health Men's Health Program, a series of Mature Men Matter workshops are now being held across north-west NSW with a particular focus on small communities. Expansion of the project to smaller communities was made possible with support from Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and the Commonwealth Department of Veteran's Affairs. These gender specific workshops seek to act as a catalyst for improving individual and community wellness and well-being. They explore with participants the issues around later life change and retirement using an interactive approach which includes the use of theatre.

Setting the Scene

Learning is the 'engine' for any change in the wellness and wellbeing outcomes for individuals, groups, community or society (Avery, 2001). Wellness encompasses the various interdependent and interactive realms of humans and non-humans in a coalition of the physical realm - people, fauna, flora, natural and human built environments and technologies; mental realm; social realm and spiritual realm (Avery 1989, 1990, 2001; Powers [1994] cited by Hamil, M. in Young and Cervero, 1998; Levy, 2003).

Wellness must be attached to something, which includes fundamental aspects of living [F.A.L.] (Avery, 2001). F.A.L. includes not only the needs and wants of people, but also financial and economic aspects; educational and welfare aspects; mobility; clean and nutritious food sources and fresh water sources; hygiene; meaningful personal and social relationships and time for building and sustaining or renewing such relationships; sense of community and working positively together with different generations, cultures and lifestyles; employment and productive activities; political and legal inclusiveness; tolerance of difference and acknowledging and valuing diversity (Avery, 2001).

Change inevitably brings stress and how rural men cope with stress is dependent on both the internal and external resources available to them. Learning has been identified as having a key role in assisting people to re-negotiate meaning and identity through developmental cycles (Wenger, 1998). The link between learning, health and wellbeing is an overlapping and interdependent process (Hammond, 2002). Social participation in the local community improves health and acts as a buffer to poorer health as age increases (Baum et al, 2000). Longitudinal studies have found that social isolation often precedes illness and participation in learning plays a key role in promoting social connectedness (Hammond, 2002). Learning programs undertaken with the goal of building local networks and promoting peer programs with local people have been found to have tangible well-being effects (Hammond, 2002).

Learning in a non-formal and flexible environment sustains wellness, as well as developing capable people and groups flexible in their learning, a process which has been termed heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2003). The projects described in this paper have been undertaken with the goal of not only acting as a catalyst in improving the wellness and well-being outcomes for older rural men as they negotiate later life transitions, but also to assist in informing and enhancing the learning and practice of professionals who come into contact with rural men as they age.

Rural Masculinity

Everyday sense making means that gender roles which are socially constructed can become second nature and are perceived to be natural and beyond human control (Whatmore, 1991). The link between occupation, identity and place values can be particularly strong for men involved in rural occupations such as mining, forestry and agriculture, which have been undergoing significant structural adjustment (Foskey, 2002; Webb et al, 2002). The participants in the initial 2001 *Mature Men Matter* workshop, along with the research sample in the *Older Farmers and Retirement* study, identified the key role of peers from a similar background as sources of information and support in considering, preparing for, and negotiating life changes (Foskey 2001; Foskey, 2002).

However, the emphasis for rural men on stoicism and individuality can make it difficult for them to reach out for support and advice and therefore place them at greater risk, than women, in adaptation to life change. For example, agrarian ideology is based on a perception of farming as integrating hard work and perseverance (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). Many rural occupations tend to have strong underlying values of individualism and utilitarianism i.e. being 'useful' is 'good'. Where, as in rural Australia, there is a dominant image of masculinity based around rugged individualism, the challenge in learning activities is to acknowledge such an ideology (reinforced by mythology), whilst challenging men to better understand the importance of social and emotional connectedness to their well-being as they age.

The Learning Context

Learning is a process whereby human beings create and transform experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, senses and emotions.

Jarvis 2001:10

Learning includes the development of both technical and personal competencies and helps people to deal with life change, for learning is a means of gaining control over one's destiny and adaptation of any kind requires learning (NACA, 1990, Schuller et al., 2000). The social environment provides a stimulus for what is learnt and how it will be learnt (Jarvis, 2001). Three broad contexts can be identified in which learning occurs: informal learning, non-formal learning and formal learning (Findsen, 2002). Informal learning projects include the deliberate and sustained acquisition in daily life of specific knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes (Findsen, 2002). Non-formal learning is a systematic and organised learning activity, which occurs outside the formal system (Jarvis, 2001). Formal learning is institutionalised learning most commonly pursued in adulthood for vocational and professional certification and / or qualifications (Findson, 2002; Jarvis, 2001).

As many as one in four Australians are not participants in any formal or non-formal learning activities and state that they have no intention of returning to learning (Brown, 2002; Bundy, 2002). Around 50 % of Australians can be expected to experience difficulties using the text and documents they are likely to encounter in daily life (ABS, 1998). Literacy is strongly related to formal educational attainment that, in turn, is one of the factors identified as having an important influence on levels of participation in continued learning (ABS, 1998; Wickert and Kevin, 1995; Schuller et al., 2002).

In a rural context participation in formal and non-formal learning can be illustrated by the situation in agriculture. A range of studies undertaken within different agricultural sectors, and / or in different geographical areas of Australia, suggest that up to a fifth of farmers are not participants in any formal or non-formal training activities in agriculture - not even field days (Foskey, 2002). This group includes a high proportion of older farmers who have limited early formal education and limited literacy skills (Foskey, 2002). Among a sample of practicing farmers in an Australia-wide study undertaken by Reeve (2001), just over 5% of participants had only a primary school education. However, almost 8% of those aged 50 - 59 years had only a primary school education and just over a fifth of those aged 50 - 59 years had only partially completed secondary school (Reeve, 2001). Almost a quarter of farmers in the Australia-wide sample aged 60 years and over had only had a primary school education, and another quarter had only partially completed secondary school (Reeve, 2001). In

Australia in 2001, the median age of Australian farmers was 51 years and 15% of farmers were aged 65 years and over (ABS, 2003).

Learning and Social Capital

There is a link between the knowledge and identity resources of individuals and community social capital resources, therefore, participation in learning can have a crucial impact on social integration and social capital formation. Social capital consists of those norms and networks which enable people to act collectively and to share information and skills (Kilpatrick and Falk, 2001). These norms of trust and reciprocity are context specific and dynamic (Wood, 2002). The formal macro level includes the private sector, public sector, non-government organisations and networks; the micro level includes families and local communities (Castle, 2002). Social capital requires group action in its creation (Castle, 2002). Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric (Smith, 2002). Whilst rural communities can be supportive they ' can also attach stigma to events which offend traditional values' (Strelick et al, 1997:182).

Because social capital is not always positive it can come to restrict as well as encourage, the learning aspirations of community members (Schuller, 2000). Communities that have diverse networks and include acquaintances, as well as intimates, have a greater capacity to adapt to and thrive with change (Kilpatrick and Falk, 2001). However, communities that are dominated by bonding capital, without a balance of bridging capital can become intolerant and illiberal (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2001). This is the conundrum for learning is a crucial building block in the development of social capital, yet where a community becomes dominated by bonding capital (or vertical ties), without a counterbalance of bridging capital (or horizontal ties), then social capital can come to inhibit the capacity for community members to engage in transformative learning.

There are a number of factors that influence the type and levels of social capital within rural communities. Rural ideology which reinforces self-reliance as a central value, can tend to undermine social connectedness and impede the development of resources which would assist people to build greater resilience, and increase their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, particularly as they age. Those providing learning opportunities need to confront this potential for networks to become narrowing and oppressive, balancing this tendency through a focus on tolerance and acceptance of difference (Smith, 2002). It is therefore, important for learning provision which seeks to build social capital to work across communities, rather than focus only on those groups or individuals who present the greatest social problems (Smith, 2002).

A tendency for some communities of practice within a rural context to become dominated by bonding capital is the reason it is not an easy process engaging men in workshops which are not only focused on individual change but also on community capacity building. This is a particular challenge as the approach being taken seeks to develop a collaborative process working across group and organisational boundaries. It relies on key individuals and agencies in the community promoting participation in the activity. However, in some communities or sectors dominated by bonding capital, without a balance of bridging capital, key individuals may perceive a potential for such an activity to undermine their place or power in the community or in their sector and thus act to restrict, rather than encourage, participation.

This has been the experience in attempting to engage some (but certainly not all) service providers and communities targeted in both the *Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper Program* and the *Mature Men Matter* program. Interestingly such barriers are usually more evident within middle management, rather than among those at the coalface of service delivery. This illustrates the barrier presented by the dominance of bonding capital within the hierarchical structures of some local and regional organisations and services.

Learning and Transformation

The learning activities that are the subject of this paper include a goal of assisting the participants to undertake a process of renegotiation or transformation in identity as they face life changes, particularly the transition from a work based identity to 'retirement'. Adult and communal learning are complex, diverse and often subjective processes in which a change occurs in a person or a group of people in terms of behaviour and thinking. This change often involves other tangible changes as well - development of new technologies, practices, environments, values, beliefs, attitudes, ideals, lifestyles and philosophies or meta-cognition. It can be a shared, flexible, creative, exciting, challenging and meaningful, personal or student-centred experience (Knowles, 1984, 1990, 1997; Schön, 1983, 1987). This learning can also be a communal experience (Coombe, K., Retallick, J. and Cocklin, B. (1996); Falk, I. 1997 a & b; Avery, 2001). Such learning can also be disorienting, dangerous and challenging, even frightening for some people who are changed by the process (Mezirow, 1994, 1996).

Mezirow (1994, 1996) argues that a 'disorientating dilemma' is a necessary condition for enacting a change in meaning perspective, or world view. Jarvis (2001) argues that a disjuncture between biography and experience is one of the major motivating factors in learning. For Freire (1972, 1985) through a transformative learning process learners identify, discuss and debunk myths, moving away from a condition of 'domestication' regarding learning and knowledge construction, deliberately designed and introduced as a form of social and political control in society, in a process of 'conscientization' or the removal of social blinkers. In this context of learning initiatives seeking to improve the well-being of rural men as they age a 'disorienting dilemma' or 'disjuncture' can occur in negotiating life change such as the transition from a work based identity into retirement or the third age. The process of 'conscientization' includes challenging the ageism which can be a significant impediment to positive engagement with life change for ageism devalues the significant contributions of people in their third age within Australian society.

Mezirow, Freire, Schön, Knowles, Brookfield, Cranton, Loughlin, Falk and others have argued that critical reflection (logical-rational reasoning) and discourse or dialogue are essential processes in enabling emancipation or liberation from a controlling status quo. Cecora (1999:98) highlights the importance of reference groups to 'the individual's formation, maintenance and change of attitudes and for his or her social identity or status'. Thus peers are an important influence on the extent to which people are likely to apply change. A peer learning environment provides the context in which people can share similar stories and receive validation and support from their peers. In both of the projects which are the subject of this paper, this process of peer learning and dialogue has been triggered through workshops which bring together people who share some commonalities (whilst also having a unique range of life experiences and skills). Such a program is extremely empowering and builds a sense of group cohesion as noted by one of the facilitators at the *Farm Retirement Helper Program*.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Armidale with your retirees, they certainly are an interesting bunch, and you had put together a very good program. I will be interested to know how you keep the bunch cohesive, given the distances, although I have the feeling you are starting something big.

Presenter at the Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper Training Program

In such a process the informal learning which occurs during morning and afternoon tea, lunch and dinner is equally important in the learning process, as the non-formal learning content planned and prepared by the learning facilitator / presenter. The crucial role that this informal learning process plays in building a sense of group identity has been noted and commented on by the participants in both the Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper and the Mature Men Matter workshops.

The first thing to strike me about the participants in the meeting was their openness in sharing their personal experiences. (I only attended the second day.) Evidently there was some successful bonding in the informal period ...on the first night.

Evaluation, Workshop participant

Peer Learning - The Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper Pilot

Bureaucrats don't understand the needs of farmers – nothing gets across to a farmer like another farmer – also they understand the issues.

Focus Group Participant, *Older Farmers and Retirement Research*

In October 2001 the *Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper* pilot program recruited a group of nine retired and semi-retired farm men and women from northern NSW and brought them together in a four-day workshop at the University of New England. A follow-up program (in which additional volunteers participated) was also held in February 2002. Over a period of nine months the volunteers then provided information and support to other farmers through a combination of home visits, presentations at meetings of relevant professionals (eg Accountants and Financial Planners) and farm support services (eg Rural Financial Counselling Services), farmers organisations, workshops, seminars and field days and through media coverage in the press (eg Australian Farm Journal and Australian Seniors Newspaper); radio (eg ABC Local Radio and ABC Country Hour); and television (eg ABC Television Landline program).

Retirement is a change of direction, you've got to think of retirement as shaking off what perhaps you've been doing all your life and taking some other direction, but you've got to have some interests otherwise you'll curl up and die won't you.

Retired farmer, *Older Farmers and Retirement Research*

Among those interviewed during the *Older Farmers and Retirement* research were a number of farmers who feared retirement from farming and used negative role models as their

reference point – they told stories of depression, ill-health, isolation and death soon after following retirement from farming.

I saw my father get elderly after he left the farm. He didn't have any friends and just sat in the house there.

Focus group participant, *Older Farmers and Retirement Research*

The Older Farming and Retirement research found that a peer support program can be an important supplement to the retirement and farm succession planning services already available to farmers from professionals. This is because professionals, no matter how good, are not able to draw on the lived experience of the transition into retirement. This authentic experience is crucial to assist people in farming to build a life of renewed meaning in negotiating the transition into retirement. Many retirement education programs targeting farmers tend to be based on a 'banking' model of retirement education (Walker, 1996) in which information on farm succession or financial planning is deposited through seminars, print material or via the internet in the expectation that it will then be redrawn and acted upon. However, retirement is about far more than ensuring there is enough money in the bank or that a decision has been made on the transition of farm management - it is a significant life change requiring adequate preparation and the building of new links in the community. Support in this process is important in avoiding the sense of loss and grief, which can occur on leaving farming, turning into serious depression or worse and someone who has 'been there, and done that' can be an important guide in this process.

The volunteers described their role as illuminating the dark tunnel through which many people in farming move between life stages. It is this value of authentic experience, which is the major resource that a peer support program can provide. Although a peer learning and support program needs to be grassroots-based it also needs to be linked back into a network of professional and rural support services to ensure an adequate response to the diversity of issues farmers face as they contemplate and take their first steps into retirement, i.e. it is supplementary and complementary, rather than a one-stop service.

The pilot program has demonstrated the way in which volunteer farm retirement helpers have a place as 'catalysts for change' within the farming community. Their participation in the program helped to promote discussion on retirement transition within local farm networks, in both formal and informal settings. It has effectively drawn on, and utilised, the strong bonding networks within farming communities. As an example, one volunteer, a semi-retired farmer and member of his local NSW Farmers' Association branch, gave a talk on the program and showed the short promotional video at a branch meeting. When he was asked by other members if participation in the program had made a difference to his life, and his approach to retirement, he was able answer, that 'yes it has made a great difference'. As a result a segment on preparing for retirement became a regular feature of the branch meeting.

The pilot was also successful in making use of the media to promote positive messages and stories on the transition into retirement from farming. The Landline story was used as a catalyst to promote discussion on both succession and retirement planning within a number of farm families. However, there have also been reports from service providers that some of their clients resisted contact with the volunteers featured in the media coverage as they are regarded being too distant from their own experiences as 'ordinary' farmers. This is not an unusual response to innovation as Cecora (1999: 99) highlights, the most innovative members

of a system may be 'perceived as deviants and are accorded a dubious status with low credibility by most other members of the system'.

It is the more innovative and better-connected retired farmers who are the most likely to willingly volunteer to become involved in such a program. However, these volunteers have been perceived as deviating from the strong norm that farmers do not willingly retire. This can lead to an 'it's easy for them to talk' response to service providers by some older farmers under considerable financial stress when it is suggested they speak with a volunteer helper.

Cecora (1999: 99) also notes that whilst the effectiveness of the most innovative in actively persuading others to follow their example may be limited, 'It is their example which may engender imitation by others'. Thus, retired farmers who were leading edge during their farming career do provide important role models for retirement, particularly in encouraging upcoming generations to perceive retirement as a normal and positive life change for which they need to adequately prepare. One of the ways in which their experience can be promoted is through the rural media, as occurred during the pilot program, as well as functions which focus on innovation in farming, such as field days. However, in order to reach the less economically successful senior farmers who are non-participants in such activities it is important to include retired farmers from a range of socio-economic backgrounds among the volunteers. This highlights the importance of ensuring diversity in the backgrounds of those recruited and selected as volunteers in peer based programs, even, as in this case, where the peer program is focussed on a single industry sector.

Peer Learning - Mature Men Matter

Mature Men Matter is an interesting example of the way in which peer learning programs develop, change and expand in response to the issues and ideas of the participants. In the original proposal, funded by NSW Health Men's Health Program, it was planned to recruit thirty six male volunteers through local organisations from six New England North West communities and bring them together for a three-day workshop, with local and regional service providers joining in on the final day of the workshop. The plan was for these volunteers to be tracked over a period of twelve months through quarterly meetings to evaluate how they had applied their learning within the community. Only fifteen volunteers attended the workshop, with local service providers not taking up and promoting this learning / training opportunity to the extent originally envisaged. In part, this was because the timing of the workshop clashed with both severe drought and serious bushfires in the region which excluded several men who would have otherwise participated. Despite the smaller than planned number of participants the regional workshop was very successful in engaging the men who took part as active participants.

The fact that I was able to "open up" and communicate to a group about things I had kept to myself, has helped me.

I'm more open minded about other people's problems.

From the Evaluation Comments, November 2002 Workshop

The catalyst for the development of trust and sharing between the workshops participants was interactive theatre using a three-part scenario based around the effects of redundancy on a man, his family and community relationships. The scenario was written by Grant Dodwell of Innerplay, following consultation with the project co-ordinator and other key regional

informants. It was presented by Grant Dodwell with the assistance of two UNE based actors (Alison McConnell-Imbriotis and Martin Mantle) and provided a 'safe' vehicle for the exploration of life experiences and life change. The drama process involves the presentation of a scripted scenario, the actors then remain in character and the workshop participants are invited to ask them questions to explore the situation, the participants are then invited to select a character to coach and advise - the scenes are then replayed with application of the participants suggestions. Throughout the three days of the workshop the participants continually referred back to the impact of this use of theatre. In this way the drama acted as a catalyst for a deep and broad dialogue between the participants of the workshop.

Drama has a powerful place in modern education and health promotion due to its ability to reinforce concepts sensorially. Participants who explore issues and lessons through dramatic methodology engage in the activity utilising a multitude of senses which in turn internalises the learning process...

Aitchison, 2003:1

In addition the initial workshop featured Bill Whitting, Manager, Older Men New Ideas program of the NSW Council on the Ageing who spoke about OMNI and facilitated a practical demonstration of the OMNI group process; Graeme Ascough a semi-retired counsellor on sexuality and intimacy; Professor Joe Levy a Canadian expert on wellness; John Cross of Adult Learning Australia on men's learning; Professor Ken Watson, School of Human Biology, UNE, on the science of ageing. Dr Alan Avery from the School of Health, UNE took part in the workshop as a participant-observer. Sections of the regional workshop have been filmed for use as a learning resource for men, and the professionals that work with them.

At the request of the men at the November 2002 regional workshop a shorter version of the workshop is being toured around local communities in the New England-North West region of NSW in a series of roadshows. Theatre is the core element of each workshop, complemented by facilitators with expertise in particular areas (eg in September 2003 this includes Terry Melvin Manager Mensline Australia and Kerrigan O'Neill Drought Support Worker with New England Health) and men actively involved in older men's groups in their local community. A second scenario has been developed drawing on the *Older Farmers and Retirement* research. This is based around an older farmer who is a widower in poor health and financial difficulties, his recently divorced daughter who lives in a nearby town and is feeling burdened by her caring responsibilities, and the daughters overbearing boyfriend. This scenario was first used in May 2003 in a workshop held in Nundle and was very successful in drawing out a rich level of discussion among the participants. This has been filmed for use as part of a learning resource being developed by the School of Health at UNE on community mental health.

The workshops have been primarily undertaken in a male only, rather than a mixed gender, environment. At the February 2003 workshop in Bingara there was a marked difference in the level and depth of contributions made by the male participants, particularly in relation to the issues raised by the scenario, from a male only evening session and a mixed morning workshop session. It was found that when women are present and active in the discussion many of the male participants will simply sit back and let them do much of the talking, particularly about the more difficult emotional issues. Some men who have participated in the workshops held to date have stated that they see a male only environment as a "transitional

phase for men". In response to a request from the wives of men involved in previous workshops (along with a number of female service providers) during the September 2003 roadshow a longer workshop over one and a half days will be held in Gunnedah in a venue with two rooms and include a parallel stream for men and women, along with some shared sessions.

In order to provide the opportunity for reflection on the learning experience by the participants, the evaluations from the workshops have been purposely sent out some weeks following the workshop being held. The themes which emerge from these evaluations include being 'grateful' that the specific needs and issues of men are being acknowledged and explored, a greater awareness of the importance reaching out for support at times of stress, awareness of the importance of being available to listen and support other men in their community, and greater tolerance for the issues and concerns of other men. As at August 2003 the more tangible outcomes of the workshops include self-initiated and self-run men's groups in the small communities of Nundle and Bingara and in an aged care facility in Moree.

Learning in Communities

In the context of these two initiatives the classroom is the community, and the owners of the knowledge generated are members of the community. Many experiential and cognitive learning theorists identify the importance of concepts of situatedness, that is authentic or natural environments, in which learning not only takes place, but in which learning has contextual relevance (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wersch, 1985; Lave, 1988; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Falk (1997 a & b) argued that learning in communities is bound by shared value-sets and if value-sets are challenged in some significant way, communities either 'close ranks' and react against change, or respond in positive ways and act to transform themselves. Where individuals and groups respond positively to re-evaluating their values, learning becomes the catalyst for change (Avery, 2001). This is the process which can be observed occurring through the *Mature Men Matter* project.

In non-formal learning, authentic situated learning takes place as a cognitive apprenticeship, with a mentor coaching, guiding and facilitating the learner, or learners, in a culture that is relevant to the learner (Wenger, 1998). In the learning activities undertaken in both the *Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper* and *Mature Men Matter* programs the facilitators in the workshops in which the men have participated act as a mentor or coach, assisting the men to evaluate and renegotiate their meaning and identity, both as individuals and as a member of their community/ies (both community of place and community of interest). This is undertaken with the expectation that, in turn, these men will then become mentors or coaches for other men in their community/ies. This has occurred as men take their new understandings back into their communities and more actively support other men often on an informal basis. For example, through applying their new understanding of the importance of being available to listen to another man tell their story without necessarily needing to 'fix' or have a 'solution' to his problem.

Learning from the Process

These two projects highlight the importance of process to the outcomes in the development of a peer support program. Situatedness or context is crucial to the engagement of rural men in learning, particularly learning aiming to improve individual and community wellness and well-being. They also illustrate the importance of the style of the mentor learning facilitator to the learning which takes place. There was an interesting example of the importance of context at the Nundle workshop in May 2003. Professor Joe Levy had planned to attend the workshop, but had to cancel his trip to Australia because of the SARS outbreak in Toronto, Canada. He recorded a video presentation for use at the workshop as a lecture style presentation in front of a group of his students at York University. While watching the video the Nundle men who had attended the November 2002 workshop commented that this was 'not the Joe we know'. The men had some difficulty in engaging with the content of the presentation, however they prepared a series of questions for Professor Levy. The following morning a teleconference was held with Professor Levy in which the men had the opportunity to ask him those prepared questions. He began the discussion by commenting on his age and the way in which life change was something with which he was dealing personally - the difference in the level of engagement of the men in the discussion was notable. He had come to be a peer - albeit a peer with special expertise, and in this way was able to assist the men in exploring the content of his presentation at a deeper level.

Both the *Mature Men Matter* and the *Volunteer Farm Retirement Helper* projects help to illustrate the link between learning, well-being and social capital in rural communities. They also point to the importance of working across communities in a collaborative process in which no one agency 'owns' either the process or the outcomes, rather it extends across sectoral boundaries. This is because, in a successful learning process, there will be multiple outcomes for the men as individuals, as well as for their communities, and for the professionals whose practice is informed through a greater understanding of the gender issues for men as they negotiate life changes.

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