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Who's doing the hunting and gathering?

An exploration of gender segmentation in adult learning in small and remote Australian communities

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Abstract

Adults in Australia have tended to return relatively recently to learning in patterns that are significantly different by gender. These patterns of gender segmentation for adults are particularly noticeable in the findings of recent research by the author into adult, community and vocational learning in small and remote towns in Victoria. The issues associated with such patterns form the basis of this exploratory paper.

Introduction

This paper explores some of the issues associated with gender segmentation of adult learning in small and remote Australian communities. Recent research by the author (Golding 2002a and 2002b, Golding and Rogers 2002) in a large number of small and remote towns in Victoria[3] has revealed that women typically need to learn locally in order to adapt to changes in their lives, their family businesses and in the rapidly changing world of work. In small and remote towns, much of this women's learning takes place through adult and community education.

The paper's title alludes to the argument advanced in this paper and backed up by research evidence that in several senses many women are the new 'hunters and gatherers' for learning: for themselves, for their families and in some instances, for and on behalf of their male partners. By comparison, to extend the analogy, it is possible to argue that many men, traditionally seen as the hunters and gatherers for food, are either not as 'hungry' for the necessary learning or else are unable to access a convivial space to acquire that learning. To complete the analogy, it is possible to argue that men often get their learning at work ('in the cave') or are not engaged in formal learning at all. But first to the evidence and to the argument.

Evidence from the research cited above indicates that with some exceptions, rural men, by virtue of their attachment to farming and traditional skills associated with rural businesses, have been less able in the last few decades to adapt to the new and emerging flexible world of work, and particularly to the 'new learning' required to enter and compete in that much changed world. In difficult social and economic situations, men have tended to do what their fathers have done in times of adversity: to dig in and work harder at the same thing. In remote situations and small towns where TAFE[4] is at some distance and where many of the adult and community local learning organisations, spaces, programs and pedagogies are comprehensively feminised, men have tended to withdraw from or avoid formal learning.

In the small and remote Victorian communities studied it was mainly the women who are quietly but deliberately shaking, moving and building families and communities. In some senses, it can be argued that more men than women are 'dead in the water' when it comes to adapting to change. While the research indicates that men are nonetheless learning, on the farm and in businesses, they are particularly learning 'by doing'. However the learning men do tends to be less long term, strategic or discretionary. Typically men learn what *has* to be learned just in time for a particular practical purpose: such as a farm chemical users course, a recreational boat licence or a shooters licence.

It is likely that the reluctance of men to return to formal learning is in part an outcome of negative experiences at school by rural boys who did not 'go on' to further education.

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[3] The research included around 30 small and relatively remote towns in Victoria in 2002-2002 and focuses on adult, community and vocational education. The research primarily used evidence from extensive, recorded, focus group interviews.

[4] TAFE: Technical and Further Education.

These experiences are far from historic. Slade (2002, p.283) demonstrates that many present day Australian schoolboys experience 'mass disinterest, mass disaffection and a growing rejection not only of schooling but of organised learning.' Slade suggests that boys generally '… have neither the expectation or the desire to continue their education beyond the point of getting a job', leading to 'a negative and necessary association between formal learning and what they understand as an institutionalised and unpleasant waste of time' (p.283).

These negative attitudes towards recurrent and formal learning formed partly by negative experiences at school, place rural men at a considerable disadvantage in relation to women. Since rural men, including those on farms, work largely on their own and for themselves, they are not embedded in modern workplaces where they are surrounded or encouraged by a positive culture of workplace learning. Few rural males interact regularly with information and computer technology, as many city-based male employees do. At a time when a need to think globally as well as learn and act locally has become essential, it is possible to argue that men and boys that remain in small and remote towns are at a considerable disadvantage in relation to women and girls.

There is evidence from the author's research that in the past decade in particular, as a direct consequence of globalisation, fierce competition in markets, rural industry restructure and most recently severe droughts, Australian farming families have typically found the need to generate income off-farm and sometimes out of town. While men have had to significantly change farming and business practices to remain competitive in small towns, they have tended to undergo somewhat different and less radical personal and workplace transformations than women. Women have been forced by necessity to do their 'hunting and gathering' for learning to update or recreate their previous vocational skills. Much of this learning and the part time and poorly paid casual work it tends to generate have been concentrated as close to home and family as possible. Where adult and community education organisations exist locally, women have regularly comprised around 80 per cent of the learners.

Adults with the most extensive prior learning tend to be the most active lifelong learners. The research literature, as Ridoutt, Dutneall, Hummel and Selby Smith (2002, p.67) summarise, '… provides unambiguous evidence that workers with post-school qualifications are more likely to initiate and complete formal training than workers without similar education backgrounds'. Other research into workplace training shows that men at a higher level in stable, tenured employment are more likely to be trained than women in similar jobs.

The fact that women tend to have less access to such jobs in the first place makes the need for women to independently engage in their own local learning more critical. Males that do learn tend to engage in technical training more than women. However research also shows (Groot 1997) that the technical skills they learn depreciate more quickly become obsolete faster than other skills and tend to more firm specific. In small and remote communities the choices over where adults learn are very limited and in part constrained by previous (often negative) experiences with formal learning, particularly for men.

What is small and remote, and how is it related to accessibility to learning?

In this paper the term 'adult and community learning' refers to all forms of formal and informal post-compulsory learning regardless of the sector in which the learning takes place. The term 'small and remote' in an Australia context is taken to refer to populated localities of less than 3,000 people where the Accessibility / Remoteness Index of Australia[5] (ARIA 1999) is in the range between accessible (ARIA 1.84 to 3.35) and very remote (9.08 to 12). The ARIA acknowledges in its design that accessibility to 'goods, services and opportunities for social interaction' tend to decrease as geographic accessibility to increasingly large population centres increases. While originally developed for the health industries, the ARIA construct has been found by the author to be useful for researching and theorising accessibility / remoteness effects in adult, community and vocational education.

Remoteness is a concept relative to large population centres. By virtue of Australia's highly concentrated, mainly urban population, the majority of Australia's land area lies in the remote (5.8 to 9.08) or very remote (9.08-12) ARIA range. While the smallest and remotest communities in this range are very numerous in Australia, they are seldom visited, directly experienced or researched by most urban Australians. Indeed there are over 11,000 populated localities in Australia with more than 20 inhabitants, only 200 of which have more than 5,000 people. And yet two million in Australia people live in localities with a population of fewer than 200 people.

Service availability is related to accessibility and remoteness. The authors of a Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS) study of service accessibility in Australia (Haberkorn & Bamford 2000) documented the extent of physical inaccessibility to services in non-metropolitan Australia. They took a somewhat different tack from that taken by the formulators of the ARIA index, which defines inaccessibility of populated localities by distance to large (5,000+) service centres, looking instead at inaccessibility in relation to the location of particular services. By adopting an inaccessibility threshold of 80 km (around one hour travel time by car), they were able to demonstrate that inaccessibility differs quite markedly by service type across Australia.

Their research reveals that primary schools, as one might expect, are relatively accessible to most Australians compared with post-school learning organisations. For example only 0.4 per cent of all Australians live more than 80 km from a school, including only 28 populated localities with a population greater than 200 people (Haberkorn & Bamford 2000). TAFE learning is considerably less accessible geographically but still within 80 km for 98.4 per cent of Australians. Only 167 populated localities of more than 200 people are more than 80 km from a TAFE. By contrast one in ten Australians (9.8 per cent) in 638 populated localities of more than 200 people live more than 80 km from a university. This data highlights the critical local importance of TAFE and particularly adult and community education (ACE) provision in the smaller and remoter towns.

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[5] ARIA gives a value between zero and 12 to all populated localities in Australia which reflects its accessibility / remoteness based on proximity to population centres of increasing size. Zero is highly accessible, 12 is very remote.

The positives from this geographic data need to be tempered with a realisation that the mere presence of a TAFE Institute, campus or outreach facility does not mean that specific vocational training is available in that facility. Many basic vocational courses require on-site, residential training facilities or access to specialised trainers. KPMG (2001), in a study of the impact of Australian vocational education and training (VET) policies including 'user choice', concluded (p.4) that 'User choice is not a reality in many parts of regional and remote Australia: often there is limited or no choice about provider, content, timing or location of training.'

Though not factored into Haberkorn and Bamford's analysis, ACE is accessible in some small and remote towns, for example in rural Victoria. ACE is often available in small town and neighbourhood contexts where few other local adult learning options exist. In 2000 there were around 510 ACE providers in Victoria and 78 in New South Wales. Only around one in five learners in ACE in Australia are men. In some small communities researched by Golding males rarely come in the door of the community or neighbourhood house. But women learning in ACE are only part of the adult learning story.

Golding's research shows that in the smallest towns the most regular, local accredited (albeit largely technical) learning takes place locally in male dominated rural fire brigades and emergency service organisations. These public safety organisations reach deeper into small and remote communities than ACE or even primary schools. In 2002 there were around 1 200 Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigades and 145 State Emergency Service (SES) units in Victoria and 2400 rural fire brigades and 230 SES units in New South Wales. Golding and Hayes (2002) have identified and are researching the potential for Australian public safety organisation to be better connected to communities and perhaps to play a greater role in using their existing local infrastructure and membership: re-engaging men and boys to wider social community roles beyond their important community role in preparing for and responding to emergencies.

While presence or absence of a range of services within one-hour travel time, hypothesised by Haberkorn and Bamford, are very useful inaccessibility criteria, they are not the only factors impacting on inaccessibility. For young people and families without a reliable car or the income to run or fuel it, services including adult learning are inaccessible at a distance of only a few kilometres. An inaccessibility threshold of 80 km also takes no account of the effect of geography, seasonal road conditions and climate found across Australia.

The presence/absence of a service also says nothing about equity by group. For example Indigenous people are grossly over-represented in inaccessible communities for every service type. Similarly, a measure of theoretical accessibility to a particular service says nothing about the quality or appropriateness of the service, the service range or choice as it applies generally or to particular groups including men and women.

Why are these issues more critical in small and remote communities?

Accessibility to services such as learning in small and remote communities goes well beyond geography. There is social and community pressure on country people with local choices to use and maintain local services or else lose them. Residents in small and remote communities are seldom living on an undifferentiated 'level playing field'. The choices about where they learn and where their children learn are affected by history and traditions. Research by the author in 30 small communities in Victoria also reveals that the *social* distance between adjacent communities can be as important a barrier as the *physical* distance between them. Several people interviewed in small towns described a 'line on the road' that divides towns on the basis of their historic community of attachment.

The issue of accessibility to community organisations, particularly learning organisations, is typically tied up with gender. While issues of gender segmentation identified in Golding's research and discussed in this paper are not restricted to small and remote communities, it is striking that as towns become smaller, such segmentation becomes more obvious. For example in the smaller populated localities where the only regularly used public infrastructure is a fire station and a primary school, it is not unusual to find most of the adult volunteer involvement divided on gender lines. In somewhat larger towns of around one thousand residents, if an adult learning centre or neighbourhood house is available locally, it is typical to find minimal use or management of the centre or house by men, and minimal involvement in emergency services by women.

Gender segmentation of adult learning has been documented in the UK by McGivney (1999b). The trends observed in the UK have parallels in Australia. McGivney for example (p.7) noted that British women 'tend more than men to engage in learning activities which are connected with self development and which will expand their interest.'

This segmentation would not be such an issue if the penalties for not learning had not become so severe and debilitating for men and also their boys. An ability to learn at school is a factor that largely determines whether young people will go or stay in a small or remote community. Those that can 'learn to learn' tend to be educated and encouraged by educated parents and teachers to leave. Only those young people that have least options elsewhere tend to stay or return. Lifelong adult learning is becoming recognised as a critical success factor in communities that are experiencing change.

This paper poses (but does not answer) the question as to how community organisations and services might better adapted to changes in learning needs in small and remote communities, particularly the extent to which they have become segmented or less accessible by gender. In essence, are there ways that existing adult and community learning organisations and surrogate adult learning organisations might be made more accessible to, and inclusive of, a wider range of male and female adult lifelong learners?

The wider context for change and the importance of learning

Small and remote towns and their residents have experienced significant changes in the past decade (Rogers and Collins 2001). There has been a trend towards more income

being generated off farm and outside of small and remote towns. These trends have required adults to change direction, in part through 'new learning' (*New learning* 2001). State and Federal governments have tended to move towards capacity building as a basis for economic and social regeneration. Small and remote towns have increasingly turned to 'capacity building' initiatives to address the perceived need for local enterprises and communities to embrace new learning.

There have been moves by individuals and families taking up cheap housing in small towns, despite lack of services or jobs (Fincher and Nieuwenhuysen 1998). The need for new learning by these new adult residents and by longer term residents in difficult socio-economic circumstances is a critical issue in some small towns if inter-generational disadvantage is to be avoided. Globalisation has led to the need for enterprises, including farming enterprises and their workforces, to learn to be globally competitive. In this context, the extent to which learning may or may not be segmented by gender and/or associated with disadvantage by gender becomes a critical issue in Australian rural and remote towns.

Golding and Rogers (2002) have demonstrated a significant degree of learner segmentation based on the gender of learners and the organisational environment in which learning takes place. Their major study of the existing adult and community learning opportunities in small and remote communities across rural Victoria aimed to assist the Adult Community and Further Education Board to more effectively support their specific adult learning needs. Many of the findings about segmentation in this section derive from that research. Adult learning opportunities were closely mapped in 20 small and relatively remote towns throughout rural Victoria, including towns with and without current adult and community education provision. The research was designed to explore the characteristics of successful and effective practice as it contributes to building of community capacity to achieve economic, social, and cultural renewal.

Golding and Rogers (2002) confirmed previous research by Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000) that local adult learning can and does play a critical role in social capital development in non-metropolitan communities. In particular, it showed that the ability to be inclusive, to cooperate and network internally and externally is central to the ability of communities to achieve their goals.

Australian Bureau of Statistics census data confirm that many small and remote pastoral and agricultural communities are aging and experiencing loss of youth. As town population size decreases and the degree of remoteness increases, the ability for adults to learn locally decreases while needs remain similar. Adult learning is a critical success factor for small and remote community sustainability. Communities where people learn together, share information and knowledge, are creative and innovative, and where wide participation and involvement is fostered, are more likely to be successful. It is these community capacities that need to be built upon through adult and community learning, particularly where no other local learning options exist.

Rogers and Collins (2001) identify a need to more highly value the role of learning in community development. People in small and remote communities often need access to

informal learning pathways that begin as a process more akin to building social capital[6] than education and training (Falk, Golding and Balatti 2000). Disengaged learners gain confidence by belonging to a local learning network. They are then able to consider a variety of other formal or accredited learning opportunities.

Some of the difficulties and success factors in small and remote towns

Most of the communities in Golding and Rogers' (2002) study have traditionally been dependent, directly or indirectly, on farming.[7] By 1999 off-farm income in Australia accounted for over half of total household income on broad-acre farms[8]. In effect, people in and around small towns such as those in their study have increasingly had to learn new skills and develop new enterprises that enable them to work beyond the farm.

Average incomes are significantly and consistently lower than for capital cities, major urban areas, regional towns and also surrounding rural areas in all Australian States and Territories.[9] The average household income in rural towns in Victoria in 1996 (at 58 per cent of Sydney average income compared to 91 per cent for Melbourne) was the lowest of all major demographic regions in Australia for any State or Territory. Further, in the prior period 1991 to 1996, average Victorian rural town income declined one per cent. This decline in income is only exceeded nationally within Adelaide and in regional and rural towns in Tasmania.

Golding's research confirms that the smallest towns are hardest hit. Independent research confirms '… a strong inverse relationship between the size of a town and the level of expenditure by farmers in the town economy. The larger the town, the lower the expenditure by farmers per town resident'.[10] Such expenditure in towns below 1,000 people nationally in 1999 amounted to an average $12,000 per resident (compared with $200 per resident for towns of greater than $50,000). However 60 per cent of small Australian towns (with fewer than 1,000 residents) declined in population in the decade to 1996 (conversely 80 per cent of towns over 20,000 increased in population. The loss of population and the associated direct and indirect economic losses have affected smallest towns hardest.

Golding and Rogers (2002) showed that adult learning in small and remote communities is taking place under considerable difficulties in a dramatically changing environment where community sustainability is at stake. Traditional economic activities are sometimes no longer viable. The demographics are in flux and social values and community identities are changing.

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[6] 'Social capital' refers collectively to trust, networks, reciprocity, networks and shared norms.
[7] The main exceptions are Dinner Plain, whose economy revolves around snow-based tourism. Other towns such as Maldon have economies in which tourism plays an important part.
[8] Levantis, C 2000, 'Country towns: impact of farmers' expenditure on employment and population in Australian towns', *Sustaining Regions* Vol 1, No.1, pp.38-42.
[9] Lloyd, R, Harding, A and Hellwig, O 2001, 'Regional divide? A study of income inequality in Australia', *Sustaining Regions* Vol 1, No.1, pp.17-30.
[10] Levantis, op. cit., p.39.

Most small rural communities have lost their municipal offices, resulting in the loss of legal, financial, political, information, and organisational resources. There are opportunities for governments (local, state and national) to reach deeper into regions and small towns, through partnership with other government initiatives and by supporting community development through community-based learning.

One critical success factor for adult learning is the intervention of key people 'who inform, motivate, enthuse, encourage and advise individuals and groups and act as intermediaries' (McGivney 1999), particularly between governments and regional and local learning organisations. Other important success factors include opportunities for progression and provision of informal as well as formal learning on one site. For all of the above reasons, learning has become a critical 'must' even in the smallest and remotest towns.

Segmentation in adult and community learning

A reasonable body of literature suggests a disparity in gender, race and class with regard to accessing adult and community education, especially in rural and isolated locations (Butler and Ferrier 1999; Franklin, Short and Teather 1994; Grace 1998 McGivney 1999; McDaniel and Flowers 2000).

In relation to ACE, Johnson and Hinton (1986) in a national study concluded, on the basis of female participation rates approaching 80 per cent, that women 'almost own' Australian adult education. The *Beyond Cinderella* Australian Senate Inquiry into the adult and community education (ACE) sector deliberately singled out 'the great under-represented in ACE' (pp.49-62). While the report noted that male ACE participants were 'heavily outnumbered by females', it did not include a section about men. In endorsing a picture of the 'standard ACE user as female, financially better off than the general population, and a committed lifelong learner.' Campbell and Curtin (1999) argued that this suggested 'too narrow a focus by the ACE sector'.

Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001) in a national review of ACE concluded that 'Most national and State ACE research confirms that women clearly outnumber men as learners and workers in ACE. This phenomenon is historic and ongoing.' (p.68). They also concluded, on the basis of an extensive national review of research, that 'ACE is profoundly oriented to the educational needs of women' (p.69). ACFEB (1996) had previously confirmed that 'women have constituted 75 per cent of Australian adult education participation for the past 75 years, but this has received very little strategic focus in research, policy and planning within the adult education field'.

ACFEB data confirm the consistent predominance of women in community owned and managed adult learning centres as clients, staff and committees. There is some evidence that bias in the client base in favour of particular groups, ages and backgrounds may be inadvertently excluding other groups including men and young people in small communities. Golding (2002b) has shown that a number of emerging organisations and community-based initiatives such as *Networking the Nation* service providers, Rural

Transaction Centres, Community Enterprise Centres, community leadership programs, and progress committees appear to be attracting more male clients.

Golding and Volkoff (1999, p.24) showed that adult learner intentions and outcomes varied significantly by group, including by gender and rurality. Where gender and rurality overlapped with factors such as low skill and unemployment, the impact on outcomes from learning was particularly devastating. There is evidence from other research that access to adult learning organisations provides rural and remote adults with tangible advantages with regard to job opportunities and improved education status (ABS 1995, pp.94-95).

It has been suggested that adult education centres structure learning in a way that attracts women rather than men (McGivney 1999). The tendency for rural communities to retain conservative and traditional values, especially around gender socialisation (femininity and masculinity: Cheers 1998) may affect the way adult education centres and men perceive the learning programs they offer. Moreover, there is an absence in the literature on how socio-economic status, race and social status in small communities may create, intentionally or unintentionally, barriers to equitable access to rural adult education centres. As a consequence, adult learning centres are often viewed as feminised spaces (McGivney 1999), regardless of whether women themselves receive the kinds of advantages that men do from access to education (Butler and Ferrier 1999; Carrington, Mills and Roulston 1999).

Male withdrawal (or perhaps exclusion from) adult learning spaces is a particular issue in smaller and remoter towns where no there is no alternative local learning organisation inclusive of men. There is evidence from a range of studies of the link between wellbeing and learning, including increases in morbidity rates for men associated with connectedness to communities and an ability to learn.

Despite much comment about continued inequitable access in adult education centres across rural and isolated communities, little Australian research material exists. There is a need for more research to addresses the gap in this area by problematising gender segmentation in such organisations. In particular, there is a need to know:
- How, where and in what contexts does adult learning (formal, non-formal, informal) and segmentation of that learning occur by gender and what are the effects.
- How might that segmentation and its effects be measured and conceptualised?
- What particular roles do adult and community education (ACE) providers and neighbourhood houses play in adult learning and segmentation, separately or together?
- In what ways do organisations having some adult learning or service function deliberately or inadvertently include or exclude prospective adult learners by gender?
- What factors, contexts and strategies encourage access and participation in adult learning across organisations across gender lines?
- What are the key drivers that shape why men and women do or don't participate in adult learning?

- What can be done to minimise any observed gender segmentation and increase learning opportunities for men or women currently under-represented or excluded by such segmentation?
- Are there relationships between 'the issue of declining achievement and retention for boys' (Slade 2002, p.55) and the reluctance of some adult males to learn?

Such research should identify how accessibility to existing learning organisations (including community-based, surrogate learning organisations) might be broadened to include a wider range of participants by age, Indigenous and socio-economic status as well as by gender. Such research would also identify opportunities to improve status and access to what is already widely referred to as the *'Cinderella '* sector (*Beyond Cinderella* 1999), for the particular benefit of Australians in small and remote towns without access to alternative adult learning sectors.

What's next for men?[11]

It is important to recognise in conclusion that 'girls and women remain at a considerable disadvantage socially and economically and still require strategies to reduce sexual discrimination and harassment' (Slade 2002, p.55). While it may not fashionable to argue male disadvantage, it is important to recognise the extent to which boys and men in small and remote towns are particularly disengaged from learning and therefore disadvantaged. Boys require creative strategies in rural schools to prevent disengagement from learning and men require community-based strategies to positively re-engage. The current extreme gender-based segmentation of publicly funded adult and community learning is an obvious issue that needs addressing.

It is important also to stress, in conclusion, that the issues raised in the paper do not apply equally to all small and remote towns. The current reality of Australian county towns is indeed diverse (Rogers and Collins 2001), as are the predicted future economic prospects for Australian regions (Adams 2002, Figure 2, p.6). Nor does the paper or the research suggest all males are disengaged from learning or that gender segmentation affects all organisations in the same way. Nevertheless there is copious evidence from my own research that males in many small and remote towns desperately need access to accessible learning spaces that meet their particular and different needs, not only to enhance their immediate vocational utility, but also to become better people, parents, partners and learners over a lifetime.

McGivney (1999b, p67), in her UK research accurately summarises the similarly cruel dilemma facing men in small and remote Australian towns. That is:

> … their sense of identity is so bound up with traditional labour that they find it difficult to engage in different jobs or alternative activities. Some are consequently failing to adjust to changed social and economic conditions and their basic assumptions and expectations, especially regarding gender roles have not caught up with the cultural transformations that have taken place over the last decades. It is this cultural time lag that is affecting the well-being of some men.

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[11] The sub heading is the title of Lloyd, T and Wood, T (eds) (1996) Working with men, London.

McGivney (1999b) gets close to the heart of the problem when she suggests that Grant's (1998) observation that there is still 'a male culture which exists unchanging while everything else has been transformed all around'. This is arguably one of the greatest barriers to adult male participation in education. As Baker (1996, p.32) also suggests from UK based research,

> While it is easy to applaud the demise of male domination in the workplace - an outcome certainly long overdue - it is nevertheless still crucial to acknowledge the profound effect such a change has on men's sense of themselves. It cannot be right that so many men are left feeling confused, angry; dispossessed and powerless without that experience being publicly acknowledged and discussed.

I suggest, on the basis of the above, that male learners should come into high relief if Skilbeck's (2002) challenge to reach the 'learning poor' or 'unreached learner'[12] though adult and community education in rural Victoria is seriously taken up.

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[12] Skilbeck's seven points (Box 7, p.45) that identify 'Unreached adult learners' apply directly to men. Some solutions to the issues raised in this paper might be addressed by meeting the Skilbeck's 'Superior conditions of learning' (Box 10, p.54) specifically as they apply to men and boys.

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