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LEARNING TO BE A WOODTURNER

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ABSTRACT

National and international Government policies and reports suggest that lifelong learning is a necessity to promote the cultural, social, educational and vocational dimensions of a person's life. Many community based organisations play a significant role in providing learning opportunities for adults and thus promote a broad lifelong learning agenda. One such organisation is the Woodturners' Society of Queensland (WSQ). The aim of the WSQ is the dissemination of information to its members (the majority of whom are over 50 years old) pertaining to the craft of woodturning in addition to providing workshops, seminars and training courses that help to develop and enhance their skills of woodturning. Via semi-structured interviews, the research reported in this paper explores the experiences of ten mature aged members of the WSQ with a view to examining not only their motivation to learn woodturning but also, and most importantly, the learning processes and activities they nominated as critical to their growth. Key factors that facilitated and inhibited the learning processes are identified and discussed. The paper concludes with implications that point to the need to support communities of practice.

LEARNING TO BE A WOODTURNER

INTRODUCTION

From the cradle to the grave, learning is a lifelong activity. National and international government policies and reports suggest that lifelong learning is a necessity to promote the cultural, social, educational and vocational dimensions of a person's life (Kearns 2005). While early interpretations of lifelong learning going back to the 1960s and 1970s maintained its main purpose was personal development for individuals and promoting a better society (Rubenson & Beddie 2004), more recent policies and reports in both Australia and elsewhere have seen it in 'economic terms' where it is referred to as a means of training adults and retraining older adults in order to improve workplace productivity and change (Brown 2000; Payne 1999). Kearns (2005) comments:

there is a danger of greater inequality in society if all people are not given the opportunity and support to become motivated lifelong learners. The spectre of a learning divide in a two-tier society is a real threat in a world of constant change and discontinuity (p.32).

Kearns (2005, p. 33) goes on to suggest that one of the key issues in lifelong learning is addressing the particular learning needs of older people. Our perspective on lifelong learning in this paper is one that sees it as a vehicle for personal and social enrichment and our interest is in non-formal learning provided by a community based organisation for a group of mature older adults.

Non-formal learning is defined as 'any systematic, organised educational activity conducted outside the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population' (Findsen 2003, p.2). Examples of non-formal learning would include learning for leisure and for personal reasons. This type of learning, as opposed to formal learning which is institutionalised and leads to some type of credential, is said to constitute a significant portion of older people's lives (Findsen 2003). A good example of non-formal education that is provided by a community based organisation is the Woodturners Society of Queensland (WSQ). The WSQ is a not-for profit organisation dedicated to the continuing development of woodturning skills in Queensland. The WSQ has 245 current members, the majority of whom are older adults (i.e. 75% are over 65 years' old). An important part of the WSQ's aim is dissemination of information pertaining to the craft in addition to providing regular and special workshops, seminars and training courses for its members at the Society's headquarters aimed to develop and enhance their skills of woodturning.

The research reported in this paper is an exploration of the learning experiences of ten members of the WSQ with a view to examining not only their motivation to learn woodturning but also the learning processes and activities they nominated as critical to their growth. Our rationale for undertaking this research was twofold. Firstly, one of the writers of the paper is a member of the WSQ and became aware that the Management Committee was interested in reviewing teaching and learning within the Society in order to understand how learning might be better facilitated. With strong support from the WSQ, we applied for a QUT community service grant and were successful in receiving funding to undertake the research. Secondly, as researchers interested in the broad field of adult learning, a study that enabled us to listen to the experiences of a cohort of older learners regarding why and how they learned about the specialised craft of woodturning presented itself as a great learning opportunity. The paper begins by examining some of the salient literature in the adult learning field and then reports on the qualitative methodology that was employed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant demographic trend in Australia and other developing countries such as the United States (Kim & Merriam 2004) is an ageing population. By way of example, it is estimated that by 2050, one in four Australians will be aged 65 or over. (Department of Education, Science & Training 2003). With the increase in life expectancy, workers who retire from the workplace at 55 today, generally can expect to live another 20 years enjoying an independent life (MacKean 2002). The trend towards an ageing population points to two important implications. Firstly, that an ageing population will require appropriate health and welfare provisions to meet the needs of this group of people.

Secondly, consideration must be given regarding the provision of appropriate learning opportunities and activities for this group as a means of enabling them to lead more enriching lives. It is the latter concern that is of most interest to us in this paper, particularly given the common stereotype that older people cannot learn or have great difficulty in learning (Gray & McGregor 2003) – a stereotype strongly refuted by authors such as Bennington and Tharenou (1998) and Patrickson (2003).

Nature of older adults

According to some authors, older adults are those who are aged 55 years or older (Findsen 2003). The United Nations (in World Health Organisation (WHO) 2002, <http://www.who.int/hpr/ageing/ActiveAgeing-PolicyFrame.pdf>) refers to the older adult as 60 years and over. In our study, we define *older adults* as 65 years and over and *mature aged learners* as between 45-65 (The Australian Council of Ageing cited in Choo 1999). Regardless of the exact age when a person is deemed to be 'an older adult', we recognise the limitation inherent in using chronological age to refer to 'older adults' since there is much individual variability amongst older people. For example, gerontologists remind us that older adults are not a homogenous group; ageing is an individualistic and highly variable experience (Miller 2004) and there is likely to be substantial variations according to gender, class and ethnicity (Findsen 2003) as well as health and functionality.

Motivation

While there is a dearth of studies that have looked at older adults' motivation to learn (Kim & Merriam 2004), the findings of a couple of overseas studies will be outlined here. The first of these was a survey of 88 older learners who attended lectures-discussions at a university in California conducted by Peterson (1981 in Kim & Merriam 2004). Peterson found that it was the content of courses that motivated older learners to attend the classes. In a quantitative study of 189 members who participated in Institutes of Learning in Retirement (i.e. this is a phenomenon whereby older adults in the USA and Canada can participate in college and university programs on a non-credit basis), the cognitive interest factor (i.e. intellectual curiosity and stimulation) followed by social contact (with others) were the two most frequently cited motivations for learning. (Kim & Merriam 2004). The third study was a small scale research project that involved case studies of seven older adults engaged in different types of learning activities (i.e. non-formal, formal, informal). An important finding noted by Percy and Withnall (n.d.) was that none of the older adults in their case studies was passive; they were highly motivated to learn and engaged actively in the learning process. A strong message provided by Percy and Withnall (n.d.) was the need for trainers and educators to avoid assumptions and stereotypes about the potential and motivation of older people to become learners.

Although not concerned with older adults, Houle (1961) arrived at a typology to explain motivation in adults generally. He noted that there are three main types of learners: goal oriented; activity oriented; and learning oriented adults. Goal oriented learners are those who

have a specific goal in mind (i.e. getting a qualification), while activity oriented learners are those who are interested in the social aspects of learning. Learning oriented learners are those who learn for the sake of learning. A well-known theorist of adult learning, Knowles (1998), has argued that adults are motivated to learn when they feel there is a need to learn and that need could well fulfil an activity, goal or learning need.

Learning Approaches

Because of the heterogeneity of the older adult population and the different categories of learning (i.e. formal, informal, non-formal) in which older adults might be engaged, it becomes very difficult to define the types of learning approaches within these categories that are deemed most effective in facilitating their learning. Indeed there does not appear to be a substantial body of literature that refers to how older adults learn; much of what exists focuses on the problems older adults face due to their mental and physical deterioration (Boulton-Lewis, Buys & Lovie-Kitchen 2006). Percy and Withnall (n.d.) point to another weakness in this literature and that is much of it is either descriptive or anecdotal or derived from small scale research.

A way of considering what might constitute effective adult learning practice particularly within the non-formal area is to consider the principles upon which community based learning is based. The Lifelong Learning Council Qld Inc (2002, p.1) identifies the following key characteristics of learning for adults within adult community education settings such as hobby clubs, community centres, volunteering organisations, churches and other settings and these include:

- A focus on process rather than content
- diversity, making provision for people's vocational, personal, cultural and social development regardless of their employment status
- geared to the adult status of its participants and committed to building their self esteem and sense of confidence through skill acquisition
- fundamentally learner centred and needs-based
- measured as successful in terms of its relevance to the needs of participants
- responsive to and supports local communities
- strengthens communities by building diverse skills and capacities, contributing to development of a cohesive, culturally diverse and creative society
- either informal or formal
- active concern for accessibility, inclusivity, democratic processes and social justice

(Lifelong Learning Queensland Inc 2002)

These key characteristics are said to pertain to community based learning activities for all adults including older adults. Of importance is the primacy of the adult learner who is situated at the centre of the learning; that learning is needs based and relevant to learners; that it is inclusive and utilises democratic processes; and it has the capacity to build social capital through the social relationships that are developed and nurtured. It is this latter point that is considered next.

Communities of practice

A broad explanation of the meaning of 'communities of practice' has been provided by Keen, Mahanty and Sauvage (2006) who explain that they are groups or networks of practitioners with shared interests. McDermott (2001) states that they focus on a discipline, skill or topic that is of interest to the participants and are held together by passion and value. Common to

such groups are cooperation and informality (Power and Power 1992) and a sharing of knowledge and resources.

McDermott (2001) identifies a number of factors that are evident in successful communities of practice. Among these are:

- a focus on topics deemed important by members;
- facilitation by well-respected community members;
- time and encouragement available so members can participate fully;
- personal relationships that are built among community members;
- contain an active and dedicated core group;
- forums are used for thinking together as well sharing information;
- are technically easy to access and contribute to
- build on the core values of the community

As indicated above, relationships are said to be critical to the idea of communities of practice although as Wenger (1998) points out, they are not always harmonious but can be conflictual.

METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited by written and/or verbal invitation by the President of the WSQ. Volunteers were then sent a written consent form and an appointment was made for an interview to proceed. Prior to commencing the interviews, the researchers collated a list of possible interview questions and these were discussed, and agreed to, at a meeting with the Management Committee. Semi-structured interviews lasting between one to one and a half hours in duration were conducted to explore a variety of topics relating to participants' motivation for learning; how learning was experienced; safety issues at the WSQ clubhouse; and the culture of the WSQ. Due to word restrictions only three areas: motivation to learn; how learning was experienced; and the culture of the WSQ are discussed here.

All interviews were transcribed and returned to members for their perusal, comment and change if required. Consistent with data analysis techniques in qualitative research, themes (or meaning units) were identified within each of the transcripts (Patton 1990). A method of constant comparative analysis following Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to identify themes and this process continued until further meaning units were identified and compared with earlier meaning units. Similar themes were grouped together and those that differed formed new categories (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001).

FINDINGS

Ten participants, nine male and one female, constituted the sample for this study. Five participants were over 65 and five participants were between 45 and 64. Eight of the participants were retired, one participant was working full-time, and another was working almost full-time (4 days per week). The participants' backgrounds varied from trades, to administration, to civil service, to medical work, to retail. All of them had commenced woodturning in the previous three years except for one participant who started in 1993.

Motivation for Learning

Apart from being an interesting hobby (particularly during retirement), the overwhelming reason participants identified for initially learning and then continuing with woodturning related mainly to the act of fashioning or creating an object from a piece of wood:

“to get a block of wood and make something of use” (J)

“the fact of being able to make something from ... wood spinning” (I)
“that’s what attracted me to woodturning – creativity” (H)

Related to the act of creating, was the inner joy derived from working with wood. As C said, *“I love a piece of timber. I enjoy it”* and B who noted:

“there are some things that you just think I really want to do this and the more you think about it and the more you read about it, the more excited you get. Woodturning is like that for me” (B)

Participants referred to the great sense of satisfaction they received from seeing themselves get better and become more skilled at woodturning, in addition to the great joy of giving away their work to others who appreciated it. By way of example, one participant (participant B) referred to the pleasure of making a bowl, filling it with fruit and giving it to his son who was in hospital. Another participant who is involved in toy making, referred to the wonderful satisfaction of giving away toys to children at Christmas. He saw this as *“putting something back into the community” (F)*.

Learning how to woodturn

The ten participants in the sample identified a number of different processes by which they learned how to woodturn. Most of them commented that learning to woodturn is quite involved since it incorporates basic knowledge about timber and requires the development of a number of different skills. Participant B summed it up well when he said,

“there’s a whole raft of circumstances you need to understand ... turning’s just one of them. Tools is another. Timber selection... Being able to dry timber or select timber ... then your skills in terms of how you convert that piece of timber into an object that’s interesting ... there’s an artistic type design aspect to it too” (B)

Furthermore, an important condition of being able to learn a new skill is an openness to accept the challenge of learning and the confidence to pursue the challenge. As E said, *“as far as the learning process, [a] big part of it is a confidence thing ... once you are comfortable with it, it’s not a problem” (E)*.

When participants were asked to describe how they learned to woodturn, they gave explanations of how they approached this challenge and what they learned as a result through their involvement with the WSQ. The discussion that follows identifies and explores six key processes that supported participants’ learning of woodturning:

1. Modelling / watching / demonstrations

Modelling is an important teaching and learning process whereby an expert performs a task that reveals the various phases and steps necessary for achieving a particular outcome or goal (Billett 2001). In the context of woodturning, that goal might be sharpening a tool, handling a tool, turning a piece of wood with the object of making a bowl. All of the participants referred to the importance of being able to observe and learn from the expertise of the convenors / instructors and, in some cases, other members, at the WSQ club. As one participant said,

“I always learn something, it doesn’t matter [from] who[m] it is... I get a lot out of it, whether it’s a technique or a little gem they throw you” (I)

A number of participants recollected that they did a great deal of watching before they built up the courage to pick up the tools and begin themselves. For example, E commented that

during his first four visits to the Club, he followed the convenors around, watching their every move. Another participant, C, referred only to observing the experienced instructors during his first couple of months at the Club.

2. *Guided practice and monitoring by convenors*

A key part of learning, particularly learning a skill, is to engage in the task or 'get in and do it'. In the case of the majority of participants, an instructor or convenor played a key role in guiding their initial practice and monitoring it. For example, J referred to working closely with one of the convenors for the first couple of times. This person showed him what to do and then monitored his progress. J stated that he is now at the stage of working on his own and only consulting others when he has problems. G commented that "*the most exciting [part of learning how to woodturn] was doing it yourself*" which was achieved firstly by "*careful instruction*" provided by the convenor and then doing it properly yourself.

In referring to one of the convenors, I said:

"He tells you what to do, shows you how to do it and then if you're not doing it, comes and helps you achieve what he has explained ... [he] individually helps you achieve what you should have done in the first place". (I)

This same convenor would ask questions such as "*why has this happened?*" (I). Participant I commented that the questioning was useful as it allowed reflection on the process and enabled key elements that were missing or overlooked to be identified. B concurred and referred to the value of being able to ask an approachable and knowledgeable person (i.e. a convenor) who can provide answers and directions to complex problems.

A number of participants referred to convenors at the Club who took them "*under their wing*" in the early stages and provided a great deal of one-on-one support. H's comment was typical of several others when he said, "*X was very kind, took me under his wing, a very patient tutor. He puts you on the right track*" (H)'

Guided practice followed by monitoring was viewed as invaluable since it gave participants the opportunity to practice the skills or activity independently and receive feedback on their performance. As alluded to previously, monitoring was facilitated by convenors who asked participants questions about what they were doing and why and when participants asked convenors questions. For instance, B indicated that "*if I don't understand something, I just keep asking questions*".

3. *Trial and error / practice (at the WSQ and at home)*

Participants spoke about the importance of practising whether it was at the Club or at home. Participants who owned their own equipment had the advantage of being able to try out new techniques, experiment and turn wood whenever they had the available time. For example, E noted that if he were shown how to do something at the club on Tuesday night and he was having difficulty with it, he'd return home and head straight for his shed where he would try to resolve the problem. Similarly, C claimed that if something was not working at the Club, he would go home and "*try again, start again and try to find out what was the cause that did that thing ... and so try to prevent that it doesn't happen again*".

Participants F and B noted that trying out your own ways to turn wood was an important means of learning. For example, B talked about setting a challenge for yourself and "*seeing if you can do it*" and F referred to the need to watch others, think about ways of adapting and

then find your own way. Even though errors may be the result, learning from mistakes was viewed an important experience.

4. *Advice / help from peers*

In addition to highlighting the vital role played by convenors in facilitating their learning of woodturning, participants referred to their peers as others who provided friendship, support and advice about woodturning. Regarding the former, many participants commented on the “*good friendly atmosphere*” of the Club (I) and “*being able to go over and have a cup of coffee and a chat and talk about stuff*” (D). E commented that for many members, the club provided not only an important means by which woodturning skills could be learned and developed, but also an important social venue which afforded people the opportunity to talk freely with each other and engage in genuine conversations.

Peers were identified as others who provided valuable knowledge. As A said, “*everyone I’ve spoken to is quite willing to share their knowledge*” and B noted that, “*there’s so much knowledge down there that the ... experienced ones have. They’re just oozing it out of their skin, and they’re willing to give it to you*”. In contrast to another organisation that provides tuition on woodturning, G commented that “*everyone [at WSQ] will share all their tricks*” and that convenors and members alike are generous in passing on information and showing others ways to improve. Moreover, J commented that he has received good ideas from peers and, in turn, he has on occasion provided support to the veterans who attend the Club.

While peers were identified as a positive source of assistance, a couple of participants (C and H) identified examples where their peers hindered their learning. In both cases, the participants referred to peers who gave them advice that was contrary to what they had received from others. They found this to be quite frustrating and confusing. For example, H noted that on occasion, some members looked over his shoulder and told him he was not using the tool correctly, yet he had been informed by others that what he was doing was correct. H noted that his preference was to seek out support or assistance if he felt he needed it rather than being told by a peer to change his practice.

5. *Structured courses / sessions*

The overwhelming majority of participants (i.e. seven out of ten) claimed that they had attended a structured course on woodturning early in their learning process. These courses were offered by TAFE, an instructor who now teaches at the WSQ, and convenors at the Club provide structured sessions for participants. The focus of most of these courses was the development of basic skills, including for example, how to sharpen tools, how to turn a bowl, and so on. The reason participants undertook these courses was to gain the rudiments of woodturning.

In general, participants judged the quality of the course in terms of the qualities of the teacher and his or her ability to develop confidence in learners; their credibility and competence; and their focus on safety. For example, I noted the following about her first teacher:

“[he] made you feel like you could do it and he was not overly critical... being the only woman in the class... I thought at first I would not be up to scratch, but in fact he made me feel I was up to scratch; I was probably the same as the rest of the class”
(I)

In terms of credibility, another participant referred to one of the instructors in the following ways:

“he’s got a lot of knowledge. He could take anybody’s tools and very quickly bring a disaster back into an ongoing piece of craft or work” (B)

A couple of participants commented that their instructor stressed the necessity for safety at all times. For example, operating the equipment and protecting oneself when woodturning was the first thing that X taught C. Similarly, I noted that the instructor *“impressed on us safety as well, even though he had lost a couple of fingers which really brought it home. He was very keen on safety”*

6. Reading

Regarding these six processes, reading was an activity that participants chose to do in their own time and reading was cited as often providing stimulus and ideas for current and future projects. A couple of participants referred to accessing a number of pertinent internet sites (i.e. woodwork forums) that provided useful ideas and advice regarding different aspects of woodworking. Some participants chose to purchase magazines and books for their own use and libraries, while the majority of participants reported they made use of WSQ’s comprehensive library from which they borrowed books, magazines and videos (for a small fee) in addition to reading the WSQ newsletter.

Participants commented that reading was useful when it provided the steps necessary to make a particular object. Both participants A and B indicated that working through books has been an important source of learning for them. As A said, *“not reading them cover to cover, but looking at the pictures and the captions underneath the pictures. If you didn’t understand what was going on, then you’d go into the text”*

Another favourable comment a participant directed to the library was the point that it received newly issued magazines sometimes a month in advance of newsagents. Furthermore, the cost of borrowing magazines from the library was much cheaper than paying full price at the newsagents.

CULTURE OF THE WSQ

Many of the participants spoke glowingly about the positive, friendly and welcoming atmosphere in the club due to a range of important factors such as the care, commitment and knowledge of the convenors, the camaraderie amongst members, the very good facilities and the professional approach utilised by the Management Committee. As alluded to previously, participants commented favourably on the excellent advice and instruction provided by the convenors. Participants I and F made special mention of the friendly social atmosphere at the club:

“It’s a good friendly atmosphere... I’ve heard people saying people don’t come here to turn they only come here to talk. But to me that’s very important; that’s part of one of the roles of the society – the camaraderie” (I)

F noted that one of the benefits of being a member and attending the club on a regular basis is *“the companionship ... to have someone there different to talk to ...”* As a person who has worked for more than 50 years with men, now that F is retired, he relishes the opportunity to continue to be in the company of men.

Another participant commented on the generosity of his peers: *“they want to see you do well. A couple of guys will give me a couple of bits of wood and then give me advice on how to turn it because it’s got a huge knot in it or a big piece of bark” (E)*

Participant E praised the club for its effective facilities and professional outlook:

“I had a look around, the facilities impressed me and it’s well set-up and well run and it’s good. I love it. I can honestly say that it’s [joining the club] probably the best thing I’ve ever been involved in” the woodturning society is very professionally run” (E)

In general, participants described the atmosphere of the WSQ as a positive and supportive climate that was conducive to learning and promoted happy social interactions amongst the parties. However, participants did refer to a couple of situations where tension between convenors became evident during workshops. The usual practice is for one convenor to be responsible for the instruction and guidance given to members during a particular session. The problem seemed to occur when other convenors stepped in and provided guidance without having the authority to do so. It seems that a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of convenors who are presenting workshops might help to allay this situation.

DISCUSSION

All of the participants in the sample were very enthusiastic about woodturning and were highly motivated to learn. Like the participants in Peterson’s (1981 in Kim & Merriam 2004) study, participants in this study appeared to be motivated by the ‘content’ or focus of the learning (which was woodturning). An important theme that emerged was the centrality of the ‘social’ aspect of membership to the club and this theme is one that has been identified by other studies of older adults (Kim & Merriam 2004). According to Houle’s (1961) typology of adult learners, comments by participants indicated that they may have been goal, activity or learning oriented learners or a mixture of one or more of these. For example, participants referred to the social dimension of learning (i.e. activity focus) in addition to their goals (i.e. wishing to make particular objects, wishing to get better, and so on). Furthermore, participants expressed both joy and passion for woodturning – which could be described ‘learning’ focused.

The approaches to learning that were utilised by participants in the study were not out of the ordinary; in fact they described fairly conventional ways of learning for any age group of learners. For example, modelling, guided practice and structured courses tend to represent an ‘old model’ of teaching (Lave & Wenger 1991) or a more ‘pedagogical model’ of adult learning as defined by Knowles (1998). That these types of traditional approaches to teaching and learning were highlighted by participants was an anticipated finding, given that woodturning is a highly involved skill that requires careful instruction because heavy machinery is involved and safety issues are paramount. Other approaches participants noted were learning from peers, trial and error and reading. Learning from peers represents a more constructivist approach to learning (Lave & Wenger 1991) where the social component of learning is highlighted. Trial and error as a means of learning was an expected learning approach since ongoing practice is important for improving the fine motor skills required of this craft. Most of the participants in the study had lathes at home and were able to practice what they learned in class and/or experiment with pieces of wood and learn through trial and error. Independent reading was identified by participants as a useful means of providing ideas of what to make and how to make it. A couple of participants referred to using the internet which breaks the stereotype about older people not knowing how to use technology.

An interesting finding was that some participants took a little while before they became actively engaged in the learning. Indeed a couple of them referred to observing for some weeks before they mustered up the courage to pick up a tool. This reluctance to ‘get in and do it’ may have been due to a lack of confidence, a fear of making mistakes or looking foolish. It is possible that for some participants their reluctance may have been due to earlier schooling experiences where they had been socialised to be passive learners rather than active ones (Knowles 1998). It is possible that participants’

attendance at the structured courses and encouragement by convenors may have assisted them to take those initial awkward steps towards an active engagement in the learning process. Building participants' self-esteem and confidence has been identified as a key characteristic of community based learning (Lifelong Learning Council Qld Inc 2002).

The overall perception held by participants was that the WSQ provided a rich, enjoyable and interesting learning environment for participants, both novices and more experienced members alike. Formal instruction provided by convenors and expert demonstrators was deemed appropriate and effective. Participants spoke readily of particular convenors they admired and who inspired them. These were instructors who "took them under their wing" and providing one-on-one support. It was evident that participants had respect and admiration for their convenors' specialist skills and competence. McDermott (2001) notes that this respect is an important feature within communities of practice.

The final issue raised in the discussion relates to the culture of the WSQ. As described by participants, the culture reflects many of the characteristics of both community based learning (Lifelong Learning Inc 2002) and communities of practice (Keen et al. 2006; McDermott 2001). For example, in relation to the former, there was a sense that the learning focused on process (i.e. skill development) rather than content; that the WSQ is welcoming of people from diverse backgrounds; that learning builds skills and capacities of its members; that learning is formal (ie via structured workshops) and informal (i.e. peer learning and sharing); and learning is both inclusive and accessible (Lifelong Learning Qld Inc 2002). In relation to the latter, communities of practice, there was evidence that the WSQ is an organisation that provides both rich and enjoyable learning and social outcomes for its members. The shared interest and/or topic that binds members is the skill of woodturning (Keen et al. 2006; McDermott 2001). Other features of the WSQ that resonate with McDermott's characteristics of communities of practice include facilitation / teaching by well-respected and credible convenors; encouragement and helpfulness of others (peers and convenors) at the WSQ; very positive interpersonal relationships amongst members; a Management Group that was identified as very professional and keen; and opportunities available for people to interact with each other and share (McDermott 2001). This final point was evident in the comments by participants who indicated that others at the WSQ were only too willing to help and provide advice. As noted by Wenger (1998), however, relationships within communities of practice are not always harmonious among participants since conflict can occur. This was evident in the recorded experiences of a couple of participants who expressed some discomfort about peers who gave unasked for and unhelpful advice on occasion. Another issue that emerged was tension between convenors regarding who was in the position to give advice and lead the workshop for the day. Such difficulties serve to highlight the realities and challenges members of 'communities of practice' face when learning and working with each other.

CONCLUSION

The study discussed in this paper explored the perceptions of a group of older adults regarding their motivation to learn woodturning, the approaches that assisted them to learn woodturning, and the culture of the WSQ, the organisation of which they were members. Overall, the experiences relayed by participants were resoundingly positive and underscored the joy of learning to create and fashion objects of beauty and functionality (and both in some cases) from wood. Adding to the overwhelmingly enjoyable experience was the wider context in which the learning took place. It is argued in this paper that the WSQ provided an important forum for members to engage in 'communities of practice' since members were able to learn with and from each other; share ideas and strategies; and encourage each other to improve and develop more well-honed skills in order to get better themselves.

Although this study is small in scope, we think it provides a starting point for thinking about the potential of a non-formal learning setting, such as the Woodturners' Society of Queensland, as a site for creating and nurturing 'communities of practice'. Given the trend towards an ageing population and the fact that more people may have free time post-retirement to explore a range of learning options, we would argue that any type of learning that is enriching, enabling, and enjoyable and facilitates 'communities of practice' is a worthwhile end in itself.

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