

## **The learning projects of rural third age women: enriching a valuable community resource**

Glenna Lear  
University of South Australia

---

*As a third age PhD candidate with a passion for learning, I wanted to explore the learning of other rural third age women who live on the Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP) of South Australia. This reflects the methodological stance of heuristic inquiry, which requires the researcher to have a passionate interest in the phenomena under investigation, and in this case includes my tacit knowledge as a third age learner and long-term resident of the region. I deliberately chose six very influential women over 50 years of age who have transformed their rural communities into vibrant 'can do' societies better able to cope with the economic, environmental and social changes of the last two decades. I wanted to know how they adjusted to the lifestyle changes in their middle years, after their children left home, their third age, how they adapted to the social and economic changes in rural life, and what they learned as community change agents and leaders of community organisations, boards and community development committees. My research methodology*

*gave them the opportunity to reflect on their autobiographies as co-researchers during our two informal conversations about their learning. I discovered that, at different stages in their lives, these midlife women intuitively realised that they needed to do something for themselves in the wider world, independent of the farm and their family, which required them to learn and change. They are passionate lifelong and lifewide learners, continually searching for something that challenges, excites and extends them. This paper discusses their lifewide learning and personal development in community activities and formal educational institutions, which has been personally rewarding and enormously beneficial for community viability and wellbeing. Although the numbers are low and the women come from a small remote region of South Australia, there are similar women of action in almost every community, both rural and urban, who continue to make a difference.*

---

Since I left my farm in the small community of Edillilie on the Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP) in 1988, rural communities have changed considerably throughout Australia. One of the most significant changes is the emergence of women as community leaders and change agents who transformed their communities and themselves.

As learning is my passion, I wanted to understand the changes and to explore the learning of third age women who had participated in their community regeneration on the LEP. This is reflected in the methodological stance of heuristic inquiry, which requires the researcher to have a passionate interest in the phenomena under investigation (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985: 40; Moustakas, 1990: 14–15), and in this case includes my tacit knowledge as a third age learner and long-term resident of the LEP (Polanyi, 1969: 141). In this project, the third age for women is defined as the midlife period after 50 years of age when their children are independent and they have

the time and freedom to take on new roles and build new independent identities.

Five of the six women, aged between 58 and 71, who were invited to participate in this project, are involved at different levels in transforming their rural communities into vibrant 'can do' societies better able to cope with the economic, environmental and social changes of the last two decades. I asked how they adjusted to the lifestyle changes in their middle years, their third age, how they adapted to the social and economic changes in rural life and what they learned through their community activities as change agents and leaders of community organisations, boards and community development committees. The research methodology gave them the opportunity to reflect on their autobiographies as co-researchers during our two informal conversations about their learning. Rural women tend not to talk openly about personal matters and my research offered a rare opportunity to share and explore our mutual experiences as rural women and third age learners (Coakes & Bishop, 1998: 265).

Community voluntary work was always an important responsibility for rural women but they were principally relegated to supportive community 'housekeeping' roles, responsible for fundraising, refreshments and the maintenance of services and facilities. Life was very different and, like previous generations of farm women, they were relatively invisible and their work was unrecognised (Shortall, 1992: 441; Alston, 1995: 13, 1998: 27; Rickson, 1997: 94; Teather, 1998: 210; Bock, 2006: 1). Although many were partners in the family business, that gave them very little status as it was generally assumed by professionals and outsiders to be solely for tax advantages (Alston, 1995: 18–19). In addition, they were not recognised by banks, stock agents and other business people as having any farm or business involvement or knowledge (Alston, 1995: 132). Although there were few avenues to earn essential off-farm income (Alston, 1995: 116),

apart from teaching and nursing, most jobs were low paid, low skilled, temporary and part time (Alston, 1995: 6; Jennings & Stehlik, 2000: 65).

During the early 1990s, the last of the bank branches withdrew from Cummins on the LEP and, as in other rural towns, many businesses closed, technicians and tradespeople transferred to larger centres and most of the young people left for further education and employment in the cities. Rural disadvantage increased and the communities were struggling to maintain services. Many of their shops and business premises were empty and run down and suicides increased (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005: 437, 441; Hall & Scheltens, 2005: 350–351; Tonts & Haslam-McKenzie, 2005: 192–193).

To address the socioeconomic problems government rural policy promoted local responsibility, competitiveness, self-reliance and local entrepreneurship (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005: 437; Tonts & Haslam-McKenzie, 2005: 197–198). Women were specifically targeted to increase rural productivity and provide local leadership for economic development, capacity building and community renewal (Rickson, 1997: 100; Grace & Lennie, 1998: 364; Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001: 48; Pini & Brown, 2004: 169; Shortall, 2006: 19). Since then they have transformed their communities into thriving, prosperous centres and challenged the traditional patriarchal social structure.

Three women have always lived in the same locality, two came from elsewhere in the state in the 1960s and early 70s and Marian arrived in the late 1980s. They all have a strong attachment, commitment and a passion for the lifestyle, their communities, the people and the institutions. Yet most are virtually unknown outside the region, although they have won national and state awards for their contribution to their communities.

I discovered that, at different stages in their lives, these midlife women intuitively realised that they needed to do something for

themselves, independent of the farm and their families, that would require them to learn and change. Rather than a single catalyst, for most women it was the crystallisation of a number of issues or causes of discontent (Baumeister, 1994: 288). Sarah and Esther returned to work while their children were toddlers, causing considerable public comment and disquiet, but when Louise returned to her career a few years later it was more acceptable. Martha said she was drowning under the heavy workload when her sons came home from school wanting to go farming.

The women's voluntary community involvement has provided them with some exceptional learning opportunities as managers, leaders and historians. Currently, women are heavily involved in million-dollar-plus projects to upgrade their community recreation amenities and local medical facilities. Before applying for government funding, they have to market their concepts to the wider community, gauge community support for increased debt, source local funding, determine community views and needs, and negotiate with interested parties including architects and contractors.

Women became involved in the formation and leadership of the Cummins and District Enterprise Committee on the EP in the mid 1990s. It has given the community a unified voice and has been instrumental in driving changes and transforming the social fabric of the region. It has become an umbrella organisation responding to community concerns for essential and emergency services and sponsors other committees to address those issues, manage projects and fundraise. It has enabled the women to develop leadership and organisational skills and to learn about people management, project management, marketing, writing submissions, sourcing funding, applying for grants and negotiating with governments, businesses and service providers.

One of the first projects of the Cummins and District Enterprise Committee was to create and manage a small caravan park to provide

much needed accommodation. However, their most significant project was the establishment of a community bank, from which 50 per cent of the profits are returned to the town and distributed to various groups and organisations, with about \$40,000 a year going to the local hospital. Women are on the local board and it has provided them with opportunities to learn about the banking industry, corporate governance, media reporting, financial management and legal responsibilities. The committee has also been involved in establishing and managing a number of small community businesses such as craft and op shops, which also contribute to the hospital.

By the beginning of the new millennium, there was a renewed sense of optimism and community pride and in 2002 Cummins won the state and national 'Can-Do Community' award. The signs are proudly displayed at all five entrances to the town. As in other rural towns, new businesses were developed, old ones rejuvenated and the town is thriving, revitalised and prosperous. People are retiring locally and young people are returning with their families. Now the town is making headlines for its ingenuity, creativity, social cohesion and can-do attitude.

Health issues have always been a primary concern for rural women and the provision of health services and amenities unite the whole community. Previous generations of women were instrumental in establishing the hospitals that provide a valued service to the scattered populations and are critical for the retention of their general practitioners. When they opposed government initiatives to downgrade community hospitals in 2004, they realised that they had to become more proactive and work together to retain their primary health and medical services. They are learning to prioritise sustainable services, work with other hospitals, and negotiate with government ministers and bureaucrats. Unlike the past, women outnumber men on the boards and it is providing them with new opportunities to have their voices heard and to make a difference. The

majority of community fundraising goes into upgrading the health facilities, staff training and services at the hospital, and doctors' professional and private accommodation. They also work hard to provide a good quality of life for the elderly and infirm who are very much part of the whole community.

Raising funds for the hospital, aged hostel, medical services, and other social and sporting amenities are opportunities for creativity and developing organisational skills. In recent years, Cummins organised a Kalamazoo Classic event using the double railway track through the centre of town as a race track for the rail workers' old rail trolleys, which are manually operated with a pumping action. In addition, they have held the Cummins Under Canvas, Wildeloo Rock Festival, an air show and music hall evenings. Each major event involves the whole community, attracts several thousand visitors from far and wide and raises about \$10,000 for the hospital, health infrastructure and staff training. Changing the focus every few years encourages the participation of the next generation of midlife people, relieves the pressure on the older members and maintains wider community interest and support.

The devastating bushfire at Wangary in 2005 was a learning opportunity for the whole region and Martha described it as 'a real wake up call. Suddenly some things became reality and one was danger and death' and we learned that we needed each other. However, it enabled Marian to take on a significant management and leadership role in the recovery process and she enjoyed the responsibility and found she was good at people management and counselling. As the operation closed down, her responsibilities extended to distributing the surplus donated goods, which brought her into contact with diverse groups and an international organisation. The experience gave her the confidence to nominate for state and then national leadership positions in an international service organisation. She believes that as a 'little country girl' she can

expand her organisation into regional areas and provide leadership and social opportunities for other rural and regional women.

Most of the women's learning is experiential through everyday involvement and social interactions and, unless their attention is drawn to it, they do not see it as learning. Community organisations and committees are learning organisations (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 2001) where members learn informally from each other, by giving something a go or finding someone with the expertise or skills they wish to acquire, which are the most common forms of learning in rural communities (Schubert, 2005: 229). The women's experiences opened their eyes to a wider world view. They became more observant and more critical as they noticed deficiencies, made comparisons with other communities and argued their case for change.

Two women returned to secondary education as the first step towards developing new interests during their third age. After Helen passed her Year 12 exams she was offered a temporary position teaching some courses until a qualified teacher became available. Martha studied Year 11 ancient history externally and then joined a creative writing group and became the local historian. In the 1980s she compiled several local history books during the celebrations for Australia's bicentenary and the state's 150<sup>th</sup> Jubilee. She encourages others to write, continues to collect local historical material and stories for future generations, and has written family histories for her children and grandchildren. Each year she encourages schoolchildren to become town ambassadors and takes a busload on a tour of the town's historical sites, describing what it was like for the people who lived and worked there in the past. As many of the local families have lived in the area since early settlement their history is all around them and family and local histories are of popular interest for many women.

Although these women number only a few and come from a small remote corner of South Australia, there are similar women of action

in almost every rural community, who continue to make a difference. They are passionate lifelong learners, continually searching for something that challenges, excites and extends them. For rural women learning is personally rewarding and has provided them with opportunities to develop an independent identity, achieve recognition, make a difference and contribute significantly to community viability and wellbeing.

## References

- Alston, M. (1995). *Women on the land: The hidden heart of rural Australia*, Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press.
- Alston, M. (1998). 'Farm women and their work: Why is it not recognised?', *Journal of Sociology*, 34(1), 23–34.
- Baumeister, R.F. (1994). 'The crystallization of discontent in the process of major life change', in T. Heatherton & J. Weinberger (eds.), *Can personality change?*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 281–297.
- Bock, B.B. (2006). 'Introduction: Rural gender studies in north and south', in B.B. Bock & S. Shortall (eds.), *Rural gender relations: Issues and case studies*, Wallingford, UK: CABI Publishing, 1–15.
- Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. (2001). 'Building resilient communities: Social work practices and rural Queensland', *Australian Social Work*, 54(2), 47–54.
- Cheshire, L. & Lawrence, G. (2005). 'Neoliberalism, individualisation and community: Regional restructuring in Australia', *Social Identities*, 11(5), 435–445.
- Coakes, S.J. & Bishop, B.J. (1998). 'Where do I fit in? Factors influencing women's participation in rural communities', *Community, Work and Family*, 1(3), 249–271.
- Douglass, B. & Moustakas, C. (1985). 'Heuristic inquiry', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 25(3), 39–55.
- Grace, M. & Lennie, J. (1998). 'Constructing and reconstructing rural women in Australia: The politics of change, diversity and identity', *European Journal of Rural Sociology*, 38(3), 351–370.
- Hall, G. & Scheltens, M. (2005). 'Beyond the drought: Towards a broader understanding of rural disadvantage', *Rural Society*, 15(2), 347–357.

- Jennings, G. & Stehlik, D. (2000). 'Agricultural women in central Queensland and changing modes of production', *Rural Society*, 10(1), 63–78.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (2001). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology and application*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pini, B. & Brown, K. (2004). 'Farm women and femocracy', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 161–173.
- Polanyi, M. (ed.) (1969). *Knowing and being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Rickson, S.T. (1997). 'Outstanding in their field: Women in agriculture', *Current Sociology*, 45(2), 91–133.
- Schubert, R. (2005). *Building sustainable communities: The connection between learning, leadership, and social capital*, PhD thesis, School of Education, Flinders University.
- Shortall, S. (1992). 'Power analysis and farm wives', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 32(4), 431–451.
- Shortall, S. (2006). 'Gender and farming: An overview', in B.B. Bock & S. Shortall (eds.), *Rural gender relations: Issues and case studies*, Wallingford, UK: CABI Publishers, 19–26.
- Teather, E.K. (1998). 'The double bind: Being female and being rural—A comparative study of Australia, New Zealand and Canada', *Rural Society*, 8(3), 209–221.
- Tonts, M. & Haslam-McKenzie, F. (2005). 'Neoliberalism and changing regional policy in Australia', *International Planning Studies*, 10(3–4), 183–200.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## About the author

**Glenna Lear** has just completed her PhD in the School of Education, University of South Australia.

## Contact details

Email: [glennalear@internode.on.net](mailto:glennalear@internode.on.net)