



HAL
open science

Bearded Women: Feminist Activism in “La Barbe” as a Form of Informal Adult Learning

Catherine Andre, Elisabeth Hofmann

► **To cite this version:**

Catherine Andre, Elisabeth Hofmann. Bearded Women: Feminist Activism in “La Barbe” as a Form of Informal Adult Learning. Joanna Ostrouch-Kami; Cristina C. Vieira. Private World(s): Gender and Informal Learning of Adults, Brill; Sense, pp.73-89, 2015, 978-94-6209-971-5. 10.1007/9789462099715_007 . halshs-02385126

HAL Id: halshs-02385126

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02385126v1>

Submitted on 28 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

6. BEARDED WOMEN

Feminist Activism in “La Barbe” as a Form of Informal Adult Learning

INTRODUCTION

Based on our experiences as vocational training lecturers and trainers in local and international development, our students/participants are mainly either politically aware people or committed activists. As for us, we are involved to varying degrees in different organisations which have in common a collective dimension: feminist movements and networks, cultural associations, local development boards, NGOs. Our strong interest in learning, adult education and transmission processes, led us to examine how the involvement in such organisations influences individual paths, and if this commitment turns out to be a source of learning, whether it is capable of affecting individual transformations, especially in terms of “power”. In the sense of Haraway (1988) and Harding (1987), our “standpoint” is not neutral, but clearly situated regarding our own activist experiences.

Our research focuses on the informal learning processes that take place for the members of one of the recent feminist organisations: La Barbe¹. This French movement² differs from other relatively recent feminist movements by its mode of action.³ Founded by feminist activists in the wake of the 2007 French presidential campaign, which had spurred sexism against Ségolène Royal, the first and only female candidate bearing serious election chances, La Barbe started as an activist movement in 2008.

Through targeted action, activists interfere in places of power during particular events, wearing a false beard in order to pinpoint – in an ironic manner – the persistence of male power and hegemony, and to make visible the numeric and symbolic domination of men in these places. La Barbe thus refers to a symbol of virility – the beard – and draws on an expression used in vernacular language in which a verbal form of the word ‘beard’ is used to express a feeling of exasperation⁴. La Barbe turns this expression into a pun, conspicuously staged⁵. The activists – women only – ironically “congratulate” the assembly for participating in the perpetuation of male domination in society and for resisting the feminisation of public life. These public appearances of La Barbe are covered and communicated by the media, press, television and social networks but also by videos made by the Barbues⁶ and posted on their national website⁷.

The choice of this research topic is partly explained through the personal experience of the authors. One of them has been a member of La Barbe since 2010. The other author knows some of the founding and active members personally, and has closely followed the evolution of the organisation since its creation. Furthermore, the interesting mode of action – work in local groups involving ironic and provocative public appearances around a key symbol of masculinity, that is the beard, and a strong use of media and social networks - justifies the choice of this particular example of a feminist movement. Throughout this research, we seek to analyse the informal learning effects resulting from a militant engagement in this particular organisation, without resorting to comparisons with other forms of feminist engagement.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to study the effect of formative involvement in La Barbe, we refer to the definition of informal learning proposed by Schugurensky (2000):

Informal learning takes place outside the curricula provided by formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. In the concept of ‘informal learning’, it is important to note that we are deliberately using the word ‘learning’ and not ‘education’, because in the processes of informal learning there are no educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula. It is also pertinent to note that we are saying ‘outside the curricula of educational institutions’ and not ‘outside educational institutions’, because informal learning can also take place inside formal and non-formal educational institutions. In that case, however, the learnings occur independently (and sometimes against) the intended goals of the explicit curriculum. (p. 2)

The assumption that activist engagement is a source of informal learning is a component of a larger action-research project on how to teach participatory methods to professionals of sustainable development.⁸

We know that adult learners (for example in literacy programs in the US) consider that one of their educational objectives is to give voice to their ideas, trusting they will be heard (Stein, cited in: Mezirow, 1997). Our research question aims to address the reversal of this evidence: is the action of giving voice to one’s ideas in public space an experience of informal learning?

The type of learning that can occur in this kind of context is best described by transformative learning, as developed by Mezirow (1997) since the 80s:

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our “line

of action.” Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioural) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labelling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. (p. 5)

In order to explore the question of the informal learning effect of feminist activism, we have chosen to refer to the theory of transformative learning. This theory is centred on the meaning of experience. Instead of non-critically assimilating explanations given by an authority figure, transformative learning develops the adult learner’s capacity to understand the meaning of his/her experience. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking, which is crucial for women in the almost universal context of patriarchy (at different degrees). When reorganising the meaning of an event, the “lived situation” will be transformed into “experience”. This process is possible through personal development, socialisation and the reinforcement of the conscience of being a unique human being in a dynamic, pluralistic world (Mezirow, 2001).

A limit of using the theory of transformative education is that this concept applies above all to formal adult education. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) insist on the place and the role of the educator as a model for alternative beliefs and behaviours (Taylor & Jarecke, cited in: English & Peters, 2012). In the case of this research, the setting is a feminist movement, which is very different from an institution of formal education. We therefore transpose Mezirow’s transformative education theory, looking for effects of transformative informal learning. Taking account of the importance of the educator in Mezirow’s approach, we assume that longer term members in a feminist organisation play a kind of educator role, and that the strongly co-constructive and reflexive nature of the operation mode of La Barbe (see below) makes the co-members into peer-educators of informal learning.

While Mezirow has not theorised from a gender perspective⁹, socially constructed gendered identities clearly qualify as “habits of mind”,¹⁰ one of the components within Mezirow’s reference framework (the other dimension being a point of view). These elements are central to the social construction of gendered identities as well as shaping the self-image, the perceptions, the roles and ambitions of individuals in relation to the biological category they have been put into since their childhood. In order for women to become conscious of their habits of mind and the way these ways of thinking, feeling and acting have been structured on gendered lines, they have to put their frames of reference into question. Becoming aware of the way one has integrated and assimilated ones’ gendered self-image, analysing how this self-image has influenced ones’ choices – training, career, role in public and private life and exploring alternative ways of living ones’ feminine identity are all key stages towards developing a feminist conscience and a motivation for feminist activism. In general, the gender approach invites self-reflection and retrospection on individual life stories and the way they have been modelled by social structures on

gendered lines, which arguably overlaps with the psycho-developmental focus of the concept of transformative learning. There is also a social emancipatory element in transformative education, in the same way that feminism holds an empowering agenda (English & Peters, 2012).

Another interesting link in the light of the operational mode of La Barbe (see below) is the great transformative learning potential of experiences that move the learners outside their comfort zones. Taylor and Jarecke (cited in: English & Peters, 2012) argue that it is unlikely for learners to seek discomfort. However, in the context of an activist engagement, this discomfort can be considered by the activist as a necessary challenge to face. The activist is therefore putting herself unintentionally in the posture of an informal learner.

Mezirow (Mezirow & Associates, cited in: Merizow, 1997) himself has mentioned participation in social action as one of the methods of transformative learning. Taylor and Foley (cited in: English & Peters, 2012) drew attention to the kind of transformation that can occur through informal learning in community-based social movements.

Considering that the feminist activists are women that feel that they are not usually heard enough in public space, the fact that they are publically giving voice to this idea is potentially an experience of informal learning.

English and Peters (2012) made a similar assumption in their interpretative research with 8 women from feminist non-profit organisations in Canada about their experience of transformative learning in these organisations. In the case of La Barbe, apart from the product of the activist work (e.g. the public intervention that are characteristic of this organisation), it is the process of activist work and the internal working and decision-making procedures that are potentially a learning experience.

Mezirow listed the following conditions for transformative learning: those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse (to advance beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments); become critically reflective of assumptions; are empathic and open to other perspectives; are willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view, and can make a tentative best judgment to guide action (Mezirow, 1997). Indeed, many non-profit organisation, and especially the feminist ones, are claiming to function according to such principles.

The analysis of the informal learning effect of feminist activism in La Barbe has been undertaken solely from the perspective of concerned activists. Theoretically, the learning effect of such advocacy could also be questioned as far as the targets of La Barbes' interventions are concerned. Transformation theory states that moral values – such as gender equality – are legitimised by agreement through discourse. The claim is that if everyone could participate in a discourse, under the ideal conditions of discourse, there would be a universal, rational consensus concerning these values (Mezirow, 1997). Advocacy can be considered as a form of engaging in such discourse, and research about its informal learning effect on the organisations

targeted by the advocacy could give some insight into this kind of involuntary form of informal learning. But this perspective has not been taken into account in the present research.

Another element we have chosen not to specifically consider is the question of a potential specificity of women's ways of learning. The emphasis of supportive relationships in women-only settings (as it is the case in La Barbe) is an important theme in research about women's learning styles (cited in: English & Peters, 2012). However we do not compare the informal learning of women in La Barbe to forms of informal learning in mixed groups or in male activists' movements. Since we seek to avoid a constructivist framework looking at women as a unique group, we do not focus on the idea of a female specificity in ways of learning, but rather on informal learning about gender.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Focusing on this notion of "meaning" in a reflective analysis of so-called informal learning situations, gives us a framework of analysis relevant to our quest to understand the "learning" dimensions of the experiences within a feminist activist group. By deconstructing societal norms through the public denunciation of male domination, La Barbe offers a new framework. Since learning leads to a change of reference frames and of patterns of meaning, it allows us to assume that activism within La Barbe has an added value in form of transformative learning through changes of patterns and perspectives.

Our central hypothesis is that through active engagement in and sense of belonging to La Barbe, women attain higher levels of consciousness and acquire new skills that implicitly or explicitly allow them to move the lines of their lives in individual and collective dimensions. La Barbe is at the same time a source, a receiver and a reflector of transformative learning. It is the "engine" of the learning dimension, because the public denunciation of male domination represents a shift of the frame of reference built for years on conventional assumptions. The 'receiver' dimension comes from the transformative potential that was there among the Barbues in a more or less obvious manner, depending on their life course (and on aspects like being heterosexual, lesbian, divorced, with a feminist partner, etc.). They joined La Barbe because they looked for such a receiver, effectively allowing them to question their frame of reference in a collective setting. La Barbe also has a potential 'reflector' dimension in the sense that the acquired consciousness and competence will not just improve their activism. The learning "gained" in La Barbe potentially reflects on the Barbues' individual, professional and even private lives (e.g. the experience of speaking up in public or not lowering ones eyes in a verbal confrontation can be transferred to the professional or private lives of the Barbues, which proves that there has been individual change). These are the transformative learning dimensions of this form of activism that we wanted to identify.

Joining La Barbe is an activist commitment that has no learning objective in itself. Therefore, the research should allow us to validate or invalidate the following hypotheses about the transformative effect of this militant practice:

- The mode of action of La Barbe is a form of determined conquest of public space – a form of “takeover” – which is very instructive as an experience, especially in relation to obstacles that women usually face concerning their place in the public space (professionally or otherwise).
- Through the denunciation of widespread and/or institutionalised discriminatory practices, the Barbues learn – on a collective and individual scale – to transgress the established codes.
- The democratic and collaborative nature of the operational mode of La Barbe (before, after and during the public appearances) greatly increases this effect and turns the collaboration with La Barbe into a learning experience.
- The “learning gained” from the activism with La Barbe is reinvested by the concerned women in their own lives (private, professional, emotional) for developing their skills and understanding of the context in which they operate, by refining their critical thinking.

In order to verify these hypotheses, we launched a questionnaire through La Barbe’s mailing list (see below).

For the purpose of analysis of the answers, we used the concept of different types of “power” as they are developed in the literature on empowerment. The empowerment approach is not a specifically feminist notion, but it has been widely adapted by gender activists, as it highlights the power dimension of inequalities faced by women on individual and collective levels.

In some of the scientific and methodological literature on empowerment (Williams et al., cited in: Oxaal & Baden, 1997) the notion is deconstructed into 4 types of powers:

Power over: This power involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation. It requires constant vigilance to maintain, and invites active and passive *résistance*. The implications in practise are conflict and direct confrontation between powerful and powerless interest groups.

Power to: This power relates to having decision-making authority, or power to solve problems, and can be creative and enabling. Strengthening this type of power implies capacity building, supporting individual decision-making and leadership.

Power within (interior power): This power refers to self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how individuals can recognise, through analysing their experiences, how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change it. It involves increasing self-esteem, self-awareness, consciousness and confidence.

Power with: This power involves people organising with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals. Social mobilisation, building alliances and coalitions strengthen this kind of power. (Oxaal & Baden, 1997, Williams et al., cited in: Oxaal & Baden, 1997)

The notion of empowerment as it is used by the feminist movements¹¹ fits perfectly into the theory of transformative education. Since we are looking at the process of “gaining power” with different dimensions, the shift of frames of reference is central to the perception of empowerment by the concerned individuals. Furthermore, the empowerment approach includes an individual and a collective dimension, which is particularly relevant to research in the context of a feminist movement in which individual and collective transformations are strongly linked.

Mezirow’s “habits of mind” shape – among other things – our psychological self-image, which is central to our interior power. As a result of transformative learning, these habits of mind shift and we become more aware about why we do (or do not) act in certain ways and consciously choose whether (or not) to revise our ideological frameworks (Cranton cited in: English & Peters, 2012).

The process of acquiring powers reinforces the learning process by promoting the passage from incidental learning to intentional learning. The conscious analysis of the activism with its different phases (see below for La Barbe) and a growing awareness of the learning processes strengthen the individuals’ “interior power”. This dimension represents a Gordian knot in a transformative learning process. The reinforcement and stabilisation of this type of power is an essential ingredient in the process of the individuals’ personal transformation.

The different types of power – namely the power to, within and with – are obviously related to each other and are mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, such a typology brings out different types of learning and allows for a classification of the answers to the questionnaires.

Our study seeks to understand how the learning process of the Barbues evolves, from the moment they chose to join La Barbe, until the inner transformation and the awareness of this transformation, in the sense of mindfulness (Langer, 1989), defined as a mindset of openness to novelty in which the individual actively constructs novel categories and distinctions.

During this first phase of this research, a questionnaire was given to the active members of La Barbe to encourage them to share their perceptions and to self-analyse the learning effect of their militant commitment. The choice of an online questionnaire, with a combination of multiple choice questions as well as open questions, with the possibility of freely choosing which and how much information the participant wants to share about her personal profile allowed for anonymous participation and addition of varying degrees of personal detail. In a future phase, this research could be carried further through semi-structured individual interviews.

By choosing a questionnaire, the choice was implicitly made to focus on “conscious” learning, in the sense that learners are aware of the learning aspect of

their activist commitment (despite the fact that *a priori* it was not their original intention when joining La Barbe). The comments of some respondents during the survey phase indicated that this awareness may (at least partially) be triggered off through the questionnaire itself.¹² Therefore, it is possible that the act of submitting the questionnaire contributed to the informal learning effect, because it stimulated a perception amongst the respondents that was not necessarily explicit before. The perception of the concerned individuals potentially acts like a filter. Subjective by nature, the personal perception can reduce the spectrum of learning effects that are identified. For example, one of the founding members emphasised other members' change in body postures during La Barbues' public appearances. Very visible to her, the concerned individuals might not have been conscious of this evolution.

THE CONTEXT OF THE INFORMAL LEARNING: LA BARBE

La Barbe is a national, informal movement composed of non-mixed regional groups: the movement decided not to comply to any formal organisational status, which also allowed it to avoid legal measures aimed at La Barbe from organisations, structures and institutions targeted by their public interventions. However a formal association – “the Friends of La Barbe” – has been created that allows fundraising and is an open space for reflections and debates.

Information is shared through mailing lists for each of the 4 groups (West, Paris, Bordeaux, Toulouse). There is also a national mailing list (managed by the Paris group) that each Barbue can access by becoming a member of the Association of the Friends of La Barbe.

Each local group can explore its own way of functioning and develop a type of internal governance that suits the local members. The process of establishing the rules and procedures of each local group has been a learning experience in itself, because it has stimulated discussion and exchange between different viewpoints.

One of the points of converging interest of all the Barbues is choosing the targets for their interventions. They seek to identify places of power where male domination is exercised. Another key element all members agree on is the use of irony as a specific signature of the Barbues' interventions. The irony is twofold: on one hand, the out of date style (19th century) beards symbolise patriarchy and paternalism. On the other hand, the participants distribute ironic leaflets to the public, in which La Barbe congratulates the men for their “achievements”. The criticism of male domination takes an ironic form by highlighting that these men remain largely amongst themselves in these spaces of power. The La Barbe members with their beards pretend to congratulate the male (or mainly male) assemblies that are targeted for “resisting against the advancement of women in society”. By preaching the opposite (e.g. the virtue of excluding women from powerful positions in the public sphere), les Barbues use humour to raise awareness about the facts that they denounce (e.g. the recognition that women are still effectively excluded from powerful positions in the public sphere).

The Mode of Action of La Barbe

In order to understand the learning effects of the investment in La Barbe, it is necessary to understand their mode of action.

The first phase is the preparation and the public intervention itself: The choice of targets for La Barbe's public appearances is based on a continuous monitoring of public events (through the internet) or via less public, important events (e.g. the annual meeting of shareholders of a company¹³). Sympathetic non-members who share La Barbe's values might provide information on potential targets.

The concerned regional group of La Barbe validates this choice. The interventions agreed on are programmed and planned through discussions by email, phone and/or during monthly meetings. In general, once the target is identified and the decision to intervene is taken, the internal operating mode includes the following phases¹⁴:

- Elaboration of the press release and the leaflet (photocopy),
- Contacting the media at different levels (local, national,...),
- Identification of the interventions location (accessibility, how the group will be deployed, etc.), either through virtual means or by visiting the venue before the intervention,
- Anticipation of the precise operating mode, such as when and how to access the venue to be seen and heard, and how to leave the place "easily" after the appearance,
- Choice of the reader of the leaflet, who reads it aloud in front of the whole venue,
- Preparation of the necessary material: banner, beards, leaflets.

The casting is decided in a consensual manner, respecting the way the women in the group want to allocate the roles according to their skills and desire.

The second phase is the public intervention and the debriefing that follows. During these appearances, the challenge is for the group to impose itself and for the reader to speak up without being invited nor expected, to read the ironic statement explaining the appearance of the group, while the other Barbues extend the banner of La Barbe (see Figure 1). When leaving the venue, the activists distribute the paper copies of their statement.

After the event, an important debriefing phase takes place through a discussion between the participants, who are invited to express themselves individually about what has been experienced, how they felt, what was pleasant or difficult, and what lessons could be learned for future interventions.

The third phase, communication and dissemination, takes place after the public appearances. The dissemination of the press release, photos and videos on social networks (once they have been edited) and on the website of La Barbe enhances the visibility and public recognition. The interventions and the follow-up communication around the events represent a form of advocacy through "naming and shaming". They seek to inform the general public about these facts of gender-inequality, in order to summon or encourage the denounced actor to change. Finally



Figure 1. La Barbe of Bordeaux during the international Comic festival in Angoulême, 2013

archiving these products in the La Barbe website¹⁵ allows an active capitalisation of the mobilisation.

DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire was developed in order to survey members of La Barbe. It was tested and put online. This survey was announced on the website of La Barbe, Paris. It contained the following questions:

- Since when have you been a member of La Barbe?
- How many meetings of La Barbe have you participated in?
- How many public interventions of La Barbe have you attended?
- Does the involvement within La Barbe have any learning effects on you? (broadly defined in terms of self-image, concerning your activism or professional life, your posture in a public space, etc.)
 - If yes, which one:
 - In your opinion, what elements of La Barbe's mode of action (preparation, public intervention, debriefing...) are most instructive for the aspects that you mentioned?
 - If not, please elaborate on your answer:
- Thank you for sharing information about who you are (socio-professional category, age, activist career, other elements etc.):
- Would you be willing to make yourself available for an interview by skype, phone or in person to elaborate on your answers with one of the interviewers?

ANALYSIS OF THE ANSWERS

After two reminders, we received 14 responses. Considering that the mailing list of Paris includes about a hundred women, half of whom are active (at least one comment during discussions on the list), the response rate is of almost 30 (thirty) per cent (14 out of 50).

The respondents were between 23 and 61 years of age, with the majority (6) being between 30 and 40 years.

The date of entry in La Barbe varied between 2008 (a founding member) and a person who had come to La Barbe only this year, with a balanced distribution (3 or 4) for the years 2010 to 2012 as years of entry.

Corresponding roughly to the time of membership, there was a relatively balanced distribution of participation in meetings.

The number of public interventions in which they had participated varied from 1 (1 answer) to 20 (3 responses), with 5 who had participated in 10 to 20 appearances.

Concerning their socio-professional profile, the members of La Barbe were more from middle class to upper middle class backgrounds and worked in education, health and culture fields. The majority of respondents had former activist experiences, in feminist organisations or involving other social and/or political or union commitments. There were also:

- 2 who had no prior activist experience
- 4 who were long-time activists
- 1 respondent did not answer this question,

As far as learning from the experience with La Barbe is concerned, there was only one person out of 14 who stated that she felt that she had learned nothing from her activism with La Barbe. She explained this by her extensive prior experience in community activism using the same types of modes of action as La Barbe.

The remaining 13 respondents were clear that engagement with La Barbe had produced a learning effect. The answers mentioned the acquisition or the consolidation of different types learning that can be assimilated to different types of power in a large sense, linked to the notion of empowerment.

The answers to the question about the learning effect have been analysed through the prism of the different powers constituent of empowerment as cited above.

According to this typology, 11 of the 13 respondents mentioned the “power within”:

- “Self-confidence”
- Assurance
- Self-affirmation, assertion,
- Triggering awareness (in the sense of eye-openers)

The same number of answers accounted for different forms of “power to” strongly linked to the “power within” dimension. They related primarily to the interventions in the public space:

- Speaking in public
- “Taking up space” in the public sphere, positioning oneself
- Knowing how to defend ones’ ideas and rights, knowing how to motivate others
- A sense of repartee
- Stress management

Some respondents mentioned that such learning had impacted on their professional lives.

Some items in the “power to” category identified learning technical skills:

- Communication, relations with media, use of social networks
- Logistics

Various other elements might also be classified as “power to”:

- Awareness about gender equality through enhanced knowledge
- Capacity for analysis and structuring of thought and reflection
- Information monitoring
- Vigilance
- Sense of realism

The contributions in terms of “power with” are also very important:

- Experience of collective modes of action
- Co-construction,
- Solidarity, sorority
- Information flow

In connection with the “power over”, there were references to learning in terms of contestation of dominating power (quotations):

- Interrupting elder men
- Resisting law enforcement officers
- Exercising the right to speak despite the fact that it was not authorised,
- Continuing to read a leaflet despite hostile reactions.

The term ‘empowerment’ was also once mentioned explicitly.

CONCLUSION, LIMITS AND PERSPECTIVES

To conclude the presentation of our preliminary results, we confirm that activism in La Barbe can be considered as a form of informal learning, as the vast majority of respondents clearly perceived a significant effect in terms of learning from their participation. This learning is informal, in the sense that it is not the objective of La Barbe and there is no specific or explicit educative action. As noted by the respondent who was among the founders, the impact in terms of learning depends largely on the “starting point” of the person who joins La Barbe.¹⁶

It is by virtue of the individual's commitment, through and in support of the collective capacity of La Barbe as an organisation, that learning occurs. Besides the public intervention itself, informal learning is taking place in the group, through the expression of opinions and preferences, through participation in collective decision-making and through the collective execution of organisational or communicational tasks. This leads to the development of critical thinking through action, a form of "reinterpretation through action". This kind of process can be classified as intelligent learning because the practical activist experience is accompanied by reflection (Merizow, 2001).

The limitations of this research are mainly linked to the time factor. Many responses arrived late and the individual interviews could not be carried out before completing the present chapter, which provides only a partial conclusion. Another weak point is the absence of a comparative perspective (comparison with activism in other feminist organisations – "classic" feminist associations, but also Femen, etc. – and other modes of actions – demonstrations, petitions, artistic performances, etc.).

Several points need to be looked at in depth during the next stage, such as continuing the analysis of the specific use of humour and irony, or addressing the importance of the non-mixed setting. These prolongations are necessary in order to investigate if these elements have a decisive effect on the learning process that accompanies activism in La Barbe. Further investigations will allow us to deepen our understanding of the nature of informal learning (e.g. the existence or not of a threshold effect in the learning process, etc.), to identify more precisely the sources of the identified learning effects and to understand the extent to which the women involved can "reinvest" their increased powers elsewhere in the public and private sphere.

NOTES

- ¹ La Barbe literally translates as 'The Beard', but has several different meanings in current language that are lost in a literal translation: 1) "(Oh) la barbe!" is very versatile and can mean: Shut up! That'll do!, and can be accompanied by a gesture of dismissal. 2) "Quelle barbe!" means: What a bore, What a nuisance! What a pain in the neck!, and can be accompanied by a chin-stroke as if one was caressing a beard.
- ² We use the words 'organisation' and 'movement' as synonyms in this text, disregarding the possible conceptual distinctions.
- ³ Concerning other relatively recent feminist movements in France, we can mention "Osez le féminisme" and at an international level, but very mediatized in France, the "Femen", whose members also use physical attributes in their communication. Whereas the latter stage women's bodies, La Barbe uses masculine physical attributes.
- ⁴ "Ça me barbe": "I have had enough of it".
- ⁵ Playing with the different meanings of La Barbe, another expression has been expression forged in line with the feminist agenda: "La barbe de la barbe": "We have had enough of all these beards (=male domination)".
- ⁶ "Barbues" means "bearded women", the members of La Barbe use this term to refer to themselves.

- ⁷ www.labarbelabarbe.org
- ⁸ <http://chaireunesco.u-bordeaux3.fr/?Approches-participatives-comment>
- ⁹ This is particularly astonishing as the original concept of transformation emerged from Mezirow's 1978 study on women (cited in: English & Peters, 2012, p. 105).
- ¹⁰ Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes may be cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological. Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view—the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation (Mezirow, 1997, pp. 5–6).
- ¹¹ International development agencies have used the empowerment approach since the Beijing conference in 1995 in a more depoliticised version, aiming only at individual empowerment and tending to reduce it to gains in economic power (which implicitly aims at integrating poor women into the market economy).
- ¹² We received for example the following remarks: “I never asked myself this question before !”, “I will have to think about this a bit longer...”, etc.
- ¹³ This might imply that some members become shareholders themselves, in a minimalistic way.
- ¹⁴ This description refers to the operating mode of the Bordeaux group.
- ¹⁵ http://www.labarbelabarbe.org/La_Barbe/Actions/Archive.html
- ¹⁶ The answer of the one person who said they did not learn can be interpreted in the same way.

REFERENCES

- English, L., & Peters, N. (2012). Transformative learning in nonprofit organizations: A feminist interpretative inquiry. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62(2), 103–119.
- Harding, S. (Ed.). (1987). *Feminism and methodology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Langer, E. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Pirson, M., Langer, E., Bodner, T., & Zilcha, S. (2012). *The development and validation of the langer mindfulness scale: Enabling a socio-cognitive perspective of mindfulness in organizational contexts*. New York, NY: Social Science Research Network, Fordham University Schools of Business Research Paper.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12.
- Mezirow, J. (2001). *Penser son expérience: une voie vers l'autoformation*. Lyon, France: Chronique sociale.
- Oxaal, Z., & Baden, S., (1997). *Gender and empowerment: Definitions, approaches and implications for policy. Briefing prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)*. Brighton, UK: University of Sussex.
- Schugurensky, D. (2000), *The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualisation of the field*. Toronto, Canada: The Research Network on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, Centre for the Study of Education and Work, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Retrieved from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/2733/2/19formsnotinfor.pdf>

Catherine André
UNESCO Chair “Training of Professionals in Sustainable Development”
LAM and IATU/STC
University of Bordeaux Montaigne
France

Elisabeth Hofmann
UNESCO Chair “Training of Professionals in Sustainable Development”
LAM and IATU/STC
University of Bordeaux Montaigne
France