What is knowledge for?

(The following is a slightly edited extract from Wikipedia on the origins of the term ‘mansplaining’)

> In 2008 American essayist and author Rebecca Solnit told an anecdote about a man at a party who said he had heard she had written some books. She began to talk about her most recent, on Eadweard Muybridge, whereupon the man cut her off and asked if she had "heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year"—not considering that it might be (as, in fact, it was) Solnit's book. Solnit did not use the word *mansplaining* in the essay, but she described the phenomenon as "something every woman knows".
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> A month later the word appeared in a comment on the social network LiveJournal. It became popular among feminist bloggers before entering mainstream commentary.

This is a great anecdote. It engages the emotions for sure. We pick sides and sympathise with her for her unacknowledged talent and authority and despise him for his blundering boorishness and (though this is a stretch) the assumptions that he perhaps made about her, purely on the basis that she was a woman.

But that last assumption was straw to the feminist fire and another person coined the word ‘mansplain’ and its popularity skyrocketed. In two years The New York Times had called it one of the Words of the Year, two years after that it was nominated by the American Dialect Society as one of the most creative words of the year, and by 2014 it was in the (online) Oxford Dictionary. Very impressive (or would be, if all awards and dictionaries hadn’t become corrupt political pantomimes).

It is but the work of minutes for a professional translator to research the etymology of a word and to furthermore develop a critique of it, which I will now do.

I feel a little more charitable towards the gentleman involved in this anecdote. Solnit is a handsome woman, and doubtless an interesting person with whom to converse and perhaps he was pushing on, hoping to win some points at a level quite different to the superficial topic of conversation.

You can’t really blame him. Statistically there are enough women who will feel or feign admiration for a man with a high level of knowledge so it is hardly a novel pick up strategy. And he got it wrong. Very wrong. It sounds like a scene from a movie.

But seriously, Solnit goes on to say it was ‘something every woman knows’. Er, no. The chances of the woman you are chatting up at a party being the actual *author* of a book you thought was important are micro indeed[1]. But whatever, the bares bones of the anecdote are that he

[1] Although it did happen on one other notable occasion in 2019.



Ed Solomon wrote “Men in Black”

was telling her something that she already knew, that put her nose out of joint, and then she had the last laugh. Classic.

Now for my criticism. That is something that everyone knows, Rebecca. Not just women. That scene is as old as time itself. To romp in and paste 'feminist grievance' over something that has been around since prehistory is absurd.

Every child, male *and* female, cherishes a memory of the first time some adult or teacher or older sibling lorded it over them with some piece of knowledge the child already possessed. The idea that there is something unique about a man doing it to a woman is ludicrously myopic and self-centred, like a teenage girl experiencing for the first time some pain well-known by everyone else in the world, but who expects the constellations to pause their normal routine and begin rotating about her pinion of novel agony.

It works every way: between couples (both ways), between drill sergeant and troop, employer and employee, teacher and student, total strangers. Knowledge is power and literally any two parties can have asymmetrical knowledge, one can be mistaken about how much the other knows, and embarrass themselves by presenting as the superior in that contest only to be shown that they are not. And it is entertaining to observers! Look up the old 'Jesais deja' joke, or read Bassanio desperately trying to placate Portia for the loss of his ring[2].

But why is that? Why are any emotions at all attached to the amount of knowledge we have, when compared to others? These are questions that I attempted to answer several years before this jumped-up pleonasm 'mansplaining' made its tawdry appearance.

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This is an excerpt from the notes I used early in the naughties when I was in the habit of inviting a crowd of people – sub-contractors, interested colleagues and interns and practicum students from RMIT, to a CPT 'Training Day'. These were day-long introductions to the CPT system. The file from which I copied this was first created in 2005 but the notes had been around for several years before that.

What is knowledge for?

Now there's this thing about knowledge.

We often pin our self-esteem on the fact that we know certain things, or that we know a certain amount of stuff.

And then there's quality! We are often proud to know something that is *right*, when all about are wrong. That's a ripper. One of my favourites. Knowing things is a thing that we work at, and in which we have an emotional stake, certainly by the time we are this age.

SO, if someone comes along, and assumes that you *don't* know something, simply by saying something to you in the form of advice or informing, this is a linguistic event, that normally indicates that the speaker assumes you don't know this already. Like a minute ago when I said:

> "At the end of the day I want you to have at least the beginnings of an idea of what a translator is."

[2] And what's the first rule of cross-examination in court? 'Never ask a question the answer to which you don't already possess'.

It is outrageous of me to imply that you don't already know this! Of course you know. Look who I'm talking to!

Why, this is a moment for offence! Hurting, insult, anger, dispute, testing, demonstration, triumph and revenge! And so the course of human relations wends its tedious way. Anybody hoping to take up a career in writing cheap television scripts please take notes.

Today I will seem to be that person who assumes you don't know anything, by telling you heaps of stuff that you probably already know. I'm going to say things to you that, simply in saying, will seem to imply that I don't think you know what I'm telling you and you may feel annoyed at this.

Please don't.

What I'm telling you today, I need you to know in order for you to work for me. If you already know it, great, but *I need to know* that you know. And rather than sit around with eight different people trying to tell me all they know, with only some of it perhaps stuff I care about, waiting for the stuff I care about to appear, it's much more efficient to simply tell you, then I know you're told.

And of course no one knows everything. If there's ten things that I need you to know, and by chance the first eight are things you already know, and with each one your anger is rising at the perceived insult, until by the time I get to the seventh you can't stand it, all those emotions take over and you blurt out "Look I know all this! Do you take me for an idiot??" and I cave in and say (because I need to maintain a level of goodwill with the people who work for me) "OK OK sorry. It was rude of me to treat you like a child." and I give up for fear of having you storm out.

But then you might miss out on the two that you *didn't* know, and then we're both stuffed! Because the last two were also critical things I needed you to know, and which I needed to know you know, you know?

And the knowledge I'm talking about is knowledge you need in order to do a job, not knowledge you need in order to prove how clever you are. Being clever, and defining yourself that way is a happy side-effect.

Makes me happy, and I've got heaps of knowledge. But let me tell you how I got it.

I lived in Japan. Boy if ever there was a country where they assume you don't know stuff. And did I ever get cut! But I was young enough and weak enough to learn to shut up. And when people are teaching you something, say, the way to do something for example, a thing which you've known how to do a particular way since you were little, it is in fact possible to shut up, and do as they say, and do it *the way* they say, if you can overcome the insult in their assumption that you didn't already know this and who the hell were they to assume that etc etc, then you will discover that by simple repetition, you can become good at what they were showing you, and only then can you compare it with the way you knew (rather than reject it at first sight because it is an insult to your prior knowledge rather than on rational grounds) and it *hasn't* displaced the one you knew, so now you have *two pieces of knowledge*, etc etc.

This is the way we turn out as adults. If we know how to do something, and we have established part of our emotional security on that knowledge, then we end up defending that as the only way, not because it's the best way, but because of the emotional stake we have in it.

We forget that when we first learnt that way (the one we're defending) it probably felt strange and unusual and we had to persevere and learn to do and know unfamiliar things before we got the hang of it and mastered it and so on.

> Then when we are emotional, irrational adults, any new method of anything will be unfamiliar and force us to do new things with our bodies and minds. But as adults, we very stupidly use that initial unfamiliarity with a new method, as evidence that it is inferior to the one we already know, which of course it is nothing of the sort![3]
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> Every method is like that when you are first exposed to it. If we are honestly arguing about which way is the best, then to make a true comparison, each method would have to be practiced an equal amount by the same person before they could honestly say which was the better.
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> And even that is simplistic, because you can have a variety of methods, each of which has certain benefits depending on the circumstances.
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> I want you to keep these things in mind today. This is the key to growth and learning, whereas obviously if you see knowledge more as a statement about who you are, as some kind of territory you must defend for political reasons rather than practical, you are more likely to resist absorbing the lessons of those around you. You are in fact sealing up the very borders over which new knowledge could otherwise migrate.
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> So I sincerely invite you to overcome any resistance to me telling you something you already know, I'm not insulting you, I know you are already highly accomplished people with lots of experience and knowledge yourselves. And there will be plenty of opportunity for you to display that knowledge to me. And don't think that if you know something interesting which is new to me that I won't absorb that and use it later and claim it as my own…why do you think I get people to tell jokes in an interview?

So I believe that this adequately covers the problem of the emotional stake that as adults we inevitably plant in our knowledge base, and I have shown how emotions – the emotions that propelled Solnit to greater fame, among other bitter and emotional women - actually constrains human development because it becomes a deterrent to anyone with knowledge trying to share it with a feminist.

I mean you can't have it both ways. You can't simultaneously take great pride in advising some wanker at a party 'Actually, I wrote that book' – a piece of knowledge that gives you great pleasure in that context - and also maintain that you don't care to acquire *new* pieces of knowledge.

Person A explaining something to person B is a very traditional and effective way to acquire knowledge. Ironically the *more* people that come to share that knowledge, the *less* it stands for some individual's claim to territorial respect, like a priest controlling an illiterate peasant or a groom who knows more about sex than his virgin bride. The smoother we make the way for knowledge to pass from one head to another the less power ignorant mansplainers will have, sisters!

But paradoxically the word 'mansplain' doesn't smooth the way at all. It blocks the way. This is a perverse, unintended consequence of a fad that took root among the historically illiterate.

If a person, who just happens to be a man, stands before a group of people, some of whom just happen to be politically motivated to characterise a man explaining something as 'mansplaining' (even perhaps because they do in fact already know what he is explaining to them), well those women are going to miss out, aren't they.

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[3] See my Theory of Second Language Acquisition to see how this effect unconsciously impedes our learning second and subsequent languages.

They will shut the man down, and they will not be invited back[4]. They will have marked themselves out as people not worth trying to teach or help. They are ingrates who will - with the sting of a serpent's tooth - lash out at any (person who happens to be a) man trying to share what they have learned in life, to the benefit of anyone who will listen, and possibly reduce opportunities for other women who ill-advisedly look up to them as a role model, making things *more* difficult for all women as a class, dragging them all down.

Perhaps he lacked the mind-reading ability to know in advance exactly what his audience already knew. But he might have been just about to say something of great benefit to all the listeners: male and female. But those who want to make it about sex will miss out and be left behind.

That's not to deny the existence of tedious people who waste our time displaying insights they hold as special but which are common knowledge to us. The world's full of dickheads and until you can afford a palanquin you gotta wade through em. But even they have something to say every now and then for which we are grateful later to have learnt.

But these women are digging their own oubliette. People with useful knowledge and advice who happen to be men (especially if they have previously been accused of 'mansplaining') will seek out and devote their attention to other people, those who can put their childish reactions aside and genuinely appreciate what a blessing it is to learn, from anyone.

Now, to tie this very tightly to the core philosophy of CPT, and repeat one of the ways in which we are different to every other company in the world of T&I: a couple of final comments on this model of me telling a group of people ten things, eight of which they probably already know, but which must take place so that I know for sure they know.

- Firstly, I'm not asking you to do anything I haven't done before myself, many times. It was a struggle I admit, but I have put up with people's assumption of my ignorance of eight of the things they were telling me, and benefited from the two I didn't know.
- Secondly, this is a critical part of the CPT System, precisely because it is a system. To make something a system is for it to cease to be synonymous with any particular individual. Just the contrary. It may have started out as an idea in someone's head, but it is now extracted, pulled out into the air exposed to all the criticism others care to heap on it and so certain to be crushed if weak or improved if valuable. The CPT System has survived this for over twenty years and now all individuals economically dependent on CPT have to study it and become equally versed in it so that they can each implement and represent it with equal fidelity, or indeed critique and improve it.

  To put it another way, the most basic way, if I promise one thing to a client, and then send someone else to deliver that thing, the delivered thing and the promised thing must be identical. To ensure that it is, we have a system. Me telling you ten things some of which you already know, so that we are both on the same page, is a critical part of the system.

  Once it is on that page it is no longer vulnerable to the foibles and preferences and poor memory and indolence of an individual. It is now durable, portable, scalable, teachable and above all else visible and verifiable which it must be for a professional, because if we can't prove that the client got what they paid for we don't deserve their money!

[4] Although it must be said Ed Solomon was very gracious and ended up exchanging friendly correspondence with the girl from the cafe